Tsongkhapa's Madhyamaka

Thubten Jinpa
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Note: This is a lightly edited transcript / notes typed by James Vitale (dharmaprotector@gmail.com). Text [in brackets] is something I added for my own clarity. Please email me if you find any errors.

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1 – Why Emptiness Matters

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I'm really happy that you have chosen to join me in this 10-part course on Tsongkhapa's Madhyamaka. In this course, what I aim to do is to be as comprehensive as possible within the limited scope of the 10-part structure; an in-depth introduction to Tsongkhapa's Madhyamaka that is philosophically rigorous, aims at conceptual clarity, is exegetically sound, and most importantly is meaningful from the point of view of a practitioner.

Now, the question is, Why Tsongkhapa? Tsongkhapa is really well known as one of the greatest thinkers in the Madhyamaka philosophy, a great authority on Madhyamaka and emptiness. So, if someone is serious about emptiness, then of course, Tsongkhapa's name should be alongside the great masters of the past. Starting all the way back to the Buddha in the teachings on the Perfection of Wisdom Sutras which are the original sources of the teaching on emptiness. Then of course, the great founder of the Madhyamaka tradition, Nagarjuna and his principal disciple Āryadeva. Then among the commentators of Nagarjuna's text are Buddhapalita, Bhaviveka, Chandrakirti and then, in that long list of great Madhyamaka thinkers, today we need to include Tsongkhapa as well.

Historically, Tsongkhapa's influence on Madhyamaka thought and practice in Tibet has been really far reaching. So, any comprehensive introductory course on emptiness really needs to include Tsongkhapa.

I'm really happy to be doing this course now because now the timing is perfect. All the great five Madhyamaka works of Tsongkhapa are now available in English.[1] I have the translations of these books in front of me. One of the important aims of this course for me is to really provide you a helpful guide that would allow you to engage with Tsongkhapa's texts directly in a way that is more focused and efficient, so I'm really happy to have this opportunity to do this course on Tsongkhapa's Madhyamaka today when all these great books are available in English.

Brief Overview of the 10 Classes

The course is structured in a progressive way in 10 classes. The first two classes are more of an introductory nature. The first class is really about why emptiness matters. The question is, "Why bother about emptiness?" Then, the second class is more specifically on Tsongkhapa's own personal search for finding the middle way view, his own quest through practice, through study, through meditation on really gaining insight into the great Madhyamaka philosophy of emptiness.

[1] (1) Illuminating the Intent - Tsongkhapa's commentary on Chandrakirti's Madhyamakāvatāra (2) Essence of True Eloquence , (3) Middle-Length Treatise on the Stages of the Path, (4) Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path, (5) Ocean of Reasoning – Tsongkhapa's commentary on Nagarjuna's Fundamental Wisdom

The third class is on what exactly is emptiness that everyone is making so much fuss about. Then, the fourth class is about identifying the object of negation. If emptiness is talking about something being empty of something, then what exactly is being negated here? This goes all the way back to the Buddha's emphasis on the teaching of no self. So, what exactly is being negated in the context of the teaching of emptiness? That's "Identifying the Object of Negation."

Class 5 is then what remains in the wake of the negation of emptiness. Here, the status of conventional truth and conventional reality is the focus. This then opens up to the next class which is on the doctrine of the two truths, conventional truth and ultimate truth.

Then, the next class is about the important distinction between two strands of Madhyamaka interpretation of Nagarjuna's teachings. The so-called distinction between Svatantrika Madhyamaka and Prasangika Madhyamaka, which then leads to the next class where Tsongkhapa is famous for posing unique tenets of the Prasangika system. There is one entire class on this.

Then, Class 9 is really about how does the concept of emptiness relate to another foundational concept in Mahayana Buddhism that is Buddha-Nature? Emptiness and Buddha-Nature are the topics of Class 9.

Then, finally, we have the final class called Culmination of the Analysis of the View which is the 10th class where we then look at how do we round up all of these points that we have discussed so far and bring it to the context of a practice. What does a realization of emptiness look like? How does a practitioner sit down and put these ideas and insights together in practice so that he or she may gain a view of what emptiness is.

That's the structure of the class.

Wisdom and Ignorance – Emptiness and Intrinsic Existence

The first topic is *Why Emptiness Matters*. Because emptiness has such been such an important focus in Mahayana Buddhism. In a nutshell, emptiness matters because emptiness is key to attaining liberation—freedom. This is why, for example, in Tsongkhapa's very influential work, Distinguishing the Definitive and Interpretable Meanings of the Buddha's Teachings, the text known as Essence of Eloquence, he begins with a quotation from a sutra which I read now:

That things are empty, free, and devoid of arising,
not knowing this, beings wander in the cycle of existence.
Thus the compassionate one helps lead these beings
to these truths through hundredfold means and reasoning.

- The Questions of Rāṣṭrapāla (Rāṣṭrapāla-paripṛcchā) [1.370]
- Quoted by Tsongkhapa in Prologue to Essence of Eloquence

This is an important citation from the sutra where the Buddha is attributed as stating that beings revolve in cyclic existence because they fail to recognize the fundamental truth of things, that things are devoid of intrinsic existence or intrinsic arising. It is this ignorance about the emptiness of phenomena that [causes] the beings to revolve in cyclic existence. In this statement is really the important point—that the understanding of emptiness of things is really the essence of the wisdom that the Buddha is trying to convey to sentient beings, to his disciples.

There is a statement in the sutras saying that in fact, all the teachings of the Buddha are ultimately aiming at the revelation of the truth of emptiness. There is a famous passage in the sutra which is quite well known which says:

All the sacred teachings
of the Tathagata
engage with suchness,
they converge on suchness,
and they points towards suchness.

- Unattributed sutra

What this statement is saying is that all the teachings of the Buddha, from the Mahayana Buddhist perspective, either directly teach emptiness, engage with suchness (a synonym for emptiness), or they come to converge… whatever may be their explicit meaning or subject matter, they ultimately converge on the meaning of emptiness. Finally, it says that other sutras point towards suchness.

So they are either directly or indirectly teaching emptiness. This is why, for example, we find in Shantideva's opening section of the 9th chapter on wisdom [in the Bodhicaryāvatāra] where he says, referring to all the previous chapters:

All of these branches discussed thus far,
these the Buddha taught for the sake of wisdom.

- Shantideva - A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life [9:1 ab]

Those that are familiar with Shantideva's text will know that Chapter 9 is the chapter on wisdom, which is a big chapter. Before that he talked about all sorts of practices including bodhicitta—cultivating awakening mind, practices of mindfulness, awareness, and all of these. So what he is saying is that all the preceding topics that he had covered in his Bodhicaryāvatāra, Guide to the Bodhisattva Way, are all taught for the sake of gaining wisdom, cultivating wisdom.

This is a really important point that we have to keep in mind. From the Mahayana Buddhist perspective, emptiness is really the most important content of the teachings of the Buddha. All the sutras, irrespective of whatever their explicit subject matter, must ultimately point towards the truth of emptiness. Because of this, in Mahayana Buddhism, two foundational ideas are there: (1) wisdom, (2) compassion, sometimes referred to as the method aspect of the path.

Those who are familiar with Mahayana Buddhism will know sometimes these two, the wisdom and method aspects are compared to two wings of a bird that help them cruise towards enlightenment. They are foundational concepts, but between these two, wisdom and method, wisdom is really seen as the core of the path and compassion and all the other method aspects of the path are really seen as complementary factors that empower the wisdom to have the capacity to finally eliminate all false views and distortions and grasping.

The core path itself is wisdom and the content of that wisdom is emptiness.

This is the connection between wisdom and emptiness. That's important to recognize. In this understanding of the wisdom and compassion or wisdom and method forming the core of the Buddhist path, this point towards a broader framework which is really important to understand, keep in mind, as you go through this course on emptiness. The important framework that the Tibetan tradition emphasizes which is to really understand the entirety of the Buddhist teaching within the framework of what is known as (1) Ground, (2) Path, (3) and Result.

Ground here refers to the nature of reality and Path relates to the actual cultivation that is based upon the understanding of that reality. Then, Result relates to the attainment of buddhahood that comes out of the practice of the Path. Interestingly, there is an important correlation across these three things, from the ground to the path to the result.

When it comes to the ground, the nature of reality is presented in the format of the two truths, the conventional truth and ultimate truth, of which ultimate truth is the most important. Ultimate truth is the truth of emptiness. That is the ground and these two aspects of the ground correlate to the two aspects of the path. Ultimate truth correlates to the wisdom of the path and conventional truth correlates to the method aspect of the path.

Then, the two aspects of the path correlate to the two aspects of buddhahood. The ultimate truth as part of reality, nature of reality. And then the wisdom aspect of the path correlates to the attainment of dharmakaya, which is the actual reality of buddhahood. Then, the conventional truth and the method aspect of the path correlate to buddha's form body, which is the various emanations and expressions that are coming out of the actual reality of buddhahood in consonance with the needs of sentient beings, so that sentient beings aspirations and needs could be fulfilled.

So, you see this really important correlation and this framework of Ground, Path, and Result captures the entirety of the Buddha's teaching. It's important to situate your understanding of the importance of emptiness within that framework. In this, the most important aspect of the teaching really pertains to the ultimate truth, which is really emptiness. This, I think, is important.

Why is there so much emphasis on wisdom and emptiness? Because the content of wisdom is emptiness and emptiness represents the direct opposite perspective of fundamental ignorance which chains us. So, when the Buddha, in the quotation earlier, talked about how sentient beings revolve in cyclic existence through the ignorance of emptiness, he is not saying that the reason why sentient beings get stuck in the cycle of existence is somehow because they have failed to understand what emptiness is as a philosophical or conceptual construct.

What he is saying is the reason why sentient beings are stuck in the cycle of existence through ignorance is because they fail to recognize the fundamental truth of things. The fundamental truth of things si that they are empty, but sentient beings continue to hold the opposite. They attribute to things as possessing some kind of objective intrinsic existence, which is totally opposite to the actual fact of things. So, this is why ignorance is the root of the cycle of existence.

What you see here is a direct oppositional relationship between wisdom and ignorance on the one side and the content of wisdom is emptiness and the content of ignorance is the assumption of intrinsic existence. They directly oppose each other. If one is serious about gaining freedom, cultivating wisdom, and understanding emptiness, one needs to be serious about understanding the nature of ignorance and the content of that ignorance.

Now, when we speak about ignorance as a source or origin of suffering and cyclic existence, it is helpful to remember what Nagarjuna says in his Fundamental Treatise on the Middle Way. He says that karma and afflictions are what give rise to suffering and karma and afflictions themselves arise from distorted perceptions of the world and that distorted perceptions of the world really arise from fundamental grasping at intrinsic existence, which he refers to in the text as conceptual elaborations. He says by eliminating conceptual elaborations, one will then be able to undo the whole chain.

> *Samsaric existence comes from karma and afflictions,*
> *they in turn from distorted perceptions, which, in turn,*

come from conceptual elaborations;
it is through realizing emptiness that such conceptual
elaboration is brought to an end.

- Nagarjuna - Root Verses on the Middle Way, 18:5

This is how we understand the statement that ignorance lies at the root of cyclic existence and our suffering. But this ignorance really has to be understood as something that is very very pervasive and actually quite deep. Here, let's look at what Āryadeva says in his *400 Stanzas*:

Just like the body faculty in the entire body,
delusion resides in all [afflictions].
Therefore, all afflictions will be destroyed
through the destruction of delusion.

- Āryadeva - Four Hundred Verses, 6:10

He uses the word delusion, timok(?), for referring to ignorance here, which is a synonym of ignorance. So the idea here is that just as the body faculty permeates all of our sensory faculties, it's just so fundamental; in the same way, ignorance or grasping at true existence or inherent existence is what underpins all the other afflictions like anger, attachment, jealousy, covetousness, all these various expressions of afflictions really are underpinned by this delusion.

This ignorance is something that really needs to be understood as not just a passive state of not knowing. Actually, what Nagarjuna and the great Madhyamaka masters including Tsongkhapa are conveying to us is that this fundamental ignorance is actually an active force of Misknowing. This distinction between simply not knowing and Misknowing is an important one because if it is simply a case of not knowing, then it is a passive form of ignorance. Whereas if it is a case of active mis-knowing, then clearly the remedy or the antidote that we need to cultivate needs to be a much more active, rather than simple withdrawal and disengagement.

This is an important distinction which needs to be made, and the active form of this mis-knowing is really brought out in one of Nagarjuna's texts, *The Seventy Stanzas*, where he says:

Things arisen from causes and conditions:
that which conceives these to be real
the Buddha taught to be ignorance;
from this emerge the twelve links.

- Nāgārjuna - Seventy Verses on Emptiness, 64

He's talking about the twelve links of dependent origination. In this stanza, Nagarjuna really presents us this understanding of what kind of ignorance he is talking about. It is simply not a

case of not knowing. He says it is a case of conceiving of things of causes and conditions to be real. There is a kind of active… that's why earlier I quoted Nagarjuna's verse where he refers to ignorance as a form of conceptual elaboration. There's a lot of fabrication going on. It's an active act of creation. Similarly, in a memorable passage, Āryadeva says:

> *Consciousness is the root of cyclic existence;*
> *the objects are its sphere of experience.*
> *By seeing no self with respect to the objects*
> *the root of cyclic existence will come to an end.*
>
> *- Āryadeva - Four Hundred Verses, 14:25*

The point here is that it is our conscious activity, activity of our thought, conceptual elaborations that really creates a whole worldview which we then believe in. That really opens up the whole chain of afflictions, creation of karma, and all the rest. All of these relate to things in the world, objects in the everyday world that we interact with. Āryadeva is making the simple point that given that it is relation to things in the world, objects that we construct and conceive them to be real, the simple act of seeing no self, selflessness, in relation to the objects, will actually open up the path to liberation.

This relationship between emptiness and intrinsic existence which is the content of ignorance is really an important one. But this tendency to really construct and conceive and create a world with an assumption of intrinsic existence is really really deep. There's a memorable passage in Aryadeva's text, where he says in the *400 Stanzas*:

> *Just as when continuity is wrongly viewed*
> *the notion of permanence arises;*
> *likewise when composites are wrongly viewed*
> *the notion of things as real arises.*
>
> *- Āryadeva - Four Hundred Verses, 14:22*

He is saying that there is something in the very architecture of our perception that we can't help but attribute intrinsic objective existence to things because when we see things that continue in time, we immediately project permanence to them. We confuse temporal continuity with permanence. When we see things that are, in actual fact, made up of many things, like tables or chairs, which are really composites, we immediately tend to see them as discrete self-enclosed realities which have self-definable identity of themselves, as something discrete, something distinguishable, objectively differentiable from other objects. He is saying this is really built in the very architecture of our perception.

So when we are talking about the ignorance that is at the root of cyclic existence, we should not think that somehow, in the process of growing up, we may have stumbled into some error and acquired some kind of habit of viewing things to be ultimately real. No, these masters are

talking about something really really fundamental to the very architecture and way in which we perceive things.

Therefore, the ignorance we are talking about that needs to be critiqued, that needs to be ultimately removed is a really really deep one, a fundamental one and I think appreciating that point is important so that we don't have the naïve assumption that somehow if we get an intellectual understanding of emptiness, everything will be fine.

Of course, cultivating intellectual understanding of emptiness is an important step, but that doesn't do the whole trick because we are not simply getting rid of an acquired bias that somehow we have picked up in the process of growing up. We are actually addressing something that is really really fundamental to the very way in which we perceive things. Aryadeva's examples that he gives about how we confuse temporal continuity with permanence and composite natures with discrete identifiable self-definable real things is an important point he's making.

Innate Grasping and Acquired Grasping

Here, one of the things that is really helpful is in the Madhyamaka literature, especially in Tsongkhapa's texts, he really emphasizes the distinction between what he calls innate ignorance, innate grasping and acquired grasping. Acquired grasping is more philosophically and intellectually and conceptually conditioned ideas that we acquire. For example, from the Madhyamaka point of view, many of the other Buddhist schools—Vaibhāṣika, Sautrāntika, Cittamatra—they all have intellectually acquired grasping at intrinsic existence.

One way of looking at the relationship between the two is that the intellectually acquired forms of grasping are ways in which we are trying to affirm and reinforce what is there innately in us; somehow giving it an endorsement, giving it a justification. The acquired graspings are a major focus in many of the Madhyamaka treatises because they propose alternative views of reality, so they are important objects of critique. But the ultimate focus of Madhyamaka texts is the critique and elimination of the innate grasping, not the acquired ones.

For us, especially practitioners, our main focus has to be the innate grasping, not the acquired ones. This is where Tsongkhapa reminds us once in a while, even in very technical sections of Madhyamaka texts, that in the end, the real debate has to be between your own innate grasping at intrinsic existence and your own cultivation of the view of emptiness. He constantly reminds us that this is not an intellectual exercise. Here we're in the business of finding ways to gain enlightenment.

What is the path to enlightenment? In this emptiness teaching, he's constantly reminding us that we need to take our own natural innate grasping as the focus of our critique and then examine its content, its perspective, and try to undo the content of that innate grasping. This distinction between innate grasping and acquired is an important one.

Innate grasping, again, we should not have a kind of an idea of one monolithic thing. Actually, there are layers and layers. This is one of the reasons why Buddhist teaching is very comprehensive, especially the Mahayana teachings. Many of the teachings aim at critiquing specific aspects of grasping. When we talk about natural innate grasping for grasping at permanence, it is natural for us just as Āryadeva reminded us that with relation to temporally extended things we tend to think of them as permanent. So, grasping at permanence and grasping at some kind of independence, objective, these things are various forms of grasping. Grasping at something as being 100% good or 100% bad, many of these are forms of grasping, but at the root of all of this is the important fundamental grasping which is really best described as a very natural assumption of objective intrinsic existence.

For us human beings, this innate assumption is really reinforced by our participation in language as well. Our language is structured around nouns and verbs and adjectives. Nouns we assume relate to things in the world. Adjectives relate to the properties of these things. The relationship we believe is structured / reflected in the conjunctions and other particles that language offers us as a device. As human beings, as language users our thought is so shaped by language, to the point where it is very difficult to distinguish whether there is such a thing as a thought prior to language or a thought without language.

The point I'm trying to make is that it's not that language conditioned us to think in this way because I said earlier that it is more fundamental than that, but our language does not help us. Our language actually reinforces this underlying assumption of objective intrinsic existence. We believe somehow that language refers to things out there in the world.

Therefore, the innate assumption we are talking about is just so fundamental that somehow we assume things to be there out there. Objectively real. Having some kind of self-definable identity whose existence is totally independent of the way in which we conceive them to be. Somehow, even if we close our eyes, we believe that things are out there as they are and our participation in the world somehow does not affect, in any way, the actual status of the reality of things.

This assumption of objective intrinsic existence is so real and we rely heavily on this. One could argue that what the teaching of emptiness is asking is too much because it is asking us to let go of that fundamental kind of assumption that we human beings grew up with and we use it to relate to the world.

For example, when we walk on the ground, we assume when we put one foot down that the ground is there to receive it. That's one of the reasons why earthquake experience is so fundamentally shattering and destabilizing because it challenges this very fundamental assumption that the earth is going to be there, the ground is going to be there when we put our foot down. But when it shakes, it really makes us wobble and it is very disorienting.

Something similar is being asked in the teaching of emptiness. The teaching of emptiness is really asking us to go that down, that deep, into asking questions about the very nature and the reality of the perspective that we are bringing in relation to the world.

When Madhyamaka masters like Nagarjuna, Āryadeva, and Tsongkhapa tells us that it is ignorance that is at the fundamental root of the cycle of existence and suffering, we need to remember that they're talking about something that is very very very deep and innate in us. That's why the teaching on emptiness takes us through layers and layers of removing the grasping. In many teachings we go progressively. For example, in some of the teachings we are led initially by dealing with grasping at permanence. So the impermanence teaching becomes important.

It then takes us through the next stage which is to really let go of assumption of some kind of self that is independent of our body and mind. We then move on to dealing with a self as some kind of owner or master of our faculties. You can see in some of these teachings a progressive guidance through removing these layers and layers ultimately arriving at emptiness. Emptiness is really the fundamental truth.

Similarly, on the flip side, the grasping at inherent existence is the deepest form of grasping. That's why in the Madhyamaka teachings, the emphasis is really on getting to that root. There is a beautiful analogy that is given in one of the sutras that Tsongkhapa cites where if you really want to get rid of a tree, you need to cut it from the root. By unrooting it, the entire tree falls down, whereas if you only chip away at the branches, it only goes so far. The teaching on emptiness and cultivating emptiness and addressing the fundamental assumption of intrinsic existence is like getting to the root. It's a much more comprehensive approach.

Earlier I said that Nagarjuna describes this fundamental assumption as a conceptual elaboration. I think this is an important point he's making because elaboration is… there's an idea of multiplicity whereas when it comes to ultimate truth of emptiness, there is a kind of oneness. That's why sometimes one of the attributes used to describe emptiness is there is absence of multiple meaning. It's a oneness of truth. Sometimes, in certain Tibetan texts, we will refer to it as a single taste.

The multiplicity of the perspective the perception of the world really comes from the assumption of objective existence. Once you attribute objective intrinsic existence, then you attribute distinctness to the things. Then, distinctness of the things are differentiated so that each thing that we believe to exist possess self-definable, self-enclosed existence. So, conceptual elaboration that Nagarjuna is talking about is the building up the entire world coming out of this very fundamental assumption.

The teaching on emptiness is sometimes described as an antidote against this kind of conceptual elaboration. Those who are familiar with Nagarjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, Fundamental Treatise on the Middle Way, in the opening salutation to the Buddha, Nagarjuna describes Buddha's wisdom, which is the wisdom of emptiness, in terms of absence from eight

attributes[2] of dependent origination and then refers to emptiness as the silencing of all conceptual elaborations.

This is a beautiful metaphor. It's like silencing of the chatter, the constant chatter of conceptual elaboration which, once we make the assumption of objective intrinsic existence, then the proliferation really starts from there. Everything mushrooms out of this because of this basic seed. The emptiness teaching is the antidote of silencing that, bringing it to an end.

On the opposite side, when ignorance attributes intrinsic existence to things, then starts the whole chatter and discourse and thought processes and elaborations, the entire conception of the world. What Nagarjuna is saying is that when you bring the teaching on emptiness, in a sense, we learn to let go of that kind of urge to create and construct and elaborate. That silencing of chatter is really the purpose of the teaching of emptiness.

There is a really nice passage in Chandrakirti's *Entering the Middle Way*:

> *Ordinary beings are chained by conceptualization;*
> *Yogis, who do not conceptualize, become free.*
> *The wise have said that the very cessation of*
> *conceptualization is the fruit of refined analysis.*
>
> *- Candrakīrti - Entering the Middle Way, 6:117*

In these four lines, Chandrakirti is contrasting yogis and ordinary sentient beings. Ordinary beings get caught up in the web of cyclic existence because we constantly conceptualize and elaborate. We are caught in this game of never-ending fabrication through our concepts. Yogis, on the other hand, choose not to do this; not to participate in this game, if you want. As a result they become free. Therefore, the cessation of such types of conceptual construction is really the result, the fruit of engaging in Madhyamaka analysis.

Similarly, Āryadeva says:

> *What is seen through conceptualization chains us,*
> *and that is what is being negated here.*
>
> *- Āryadeva - Four Hundred Verses, 16:24.2*

He says that what chains us in cyclic existence is this constant conceptual elaboration. What is seen through that is what continues to keep us stuck there. Therefore, he says that in the

[2] The salutation referred to which contains the eight attributes is: "To him who taught that things arise dependently, / Not ceasing, not arising, / Not annihilated nor yet permanent, / Not coming, not departing, / Not different, not the same: / The stilling of all thought, and perfect peace: / To him, the best of teachers, perfect Buddha, I bow down."

context of teaching on emptiness, it is this kind of conceptual elaboration that is being negated and what is seen, the content, is the object of negation here.

I think this is an important point to remember. This reminds me of a beautiful passage; of a hymn to Vajrayogini in my personal practice. The hymn was written by the Sakya master, Tsarchen Losel Gyatso:

> *Even though I searched in all sorts of ways for you,*
> *O noble lady, I failed to find certainty in your true existence.*
> *So, wearied by conceptual elaborations, this youthful mind*
> *seeks respite in the quiet forest of what is inexpressible.*
>
> *- Tsarchen Losel Gyatso - A Hymn to Vajrayogini*

This is really beautiful. The imagery here is our restless busy monkey mind constantly seeking justifications for our assumption of intrinsic existence. Even when you are a practitioner in relation to Vajrayogini practice, because of your devotion, you want to make connection with Vajrayogini but then if you assume Vajrayogini's true existence, you keep searching for it and you don't find it.

The imagery here is a young boy, a young mind, youthful mind. As a result of constant searching for true existence of Vajrayogini, finally realizes that is a fruitless pursuit and then seeks respite in the quiet forest of inexpressible truth of emptiness.

I think this silencing of the chatter of thought, the silencing of the chatter of conceptual elaboration as an important function, an important benefit of emptiness meditation, is an important one. Why is this important? Because what it is teaching us is ways in which we can not only accept the truth of the absence of intrinsic existence, absence of true existence, the groundlessness in the end, absence of objective reality, not only do we learn to accept that truth, but more importantly, the practice and teaching on emptiness is teaching us to make peace with the state of mind where we no longer feel the urge to seek such grounding in objective existence.

This is why when we relate to the teaching on emptiness, intellectual understanding alone is not adequate. Intellectual understanding may take us up to a point where we can make sense that our assumption of intrinsic existence is unfounded, it's the source of the problem, and so on. We also may get a sort of better idea of what emptiness is, but in order for the teaching on emptiness and the practice to really have an effect, we have to internalize this understanding through practice and meditation.

Not only that, but also apply it in our everyday experience and relate this to the way in which we interact with the world so that what we are doing is we are making a fundamental shift in the way we view the world, we view ourselves, we relate to the world. From an assumption of objective intrinsic existence to recognizing things as devoid of such existence, yet recognizing

their everyday reality. This is something that we will pick up later. What I'm pointing at is finding a way to view the world in what Madhyamaka texts refer to as an illusion-like manner.

An important part of that is not only meditation. Sometimes Buddhists tend to forget that beyond meditation, there is the everyday world. An impact of the teaching and practice into your life has to also come from your application of the insights in everyday world. This is where, for example, His Holiness often reminds us of the importance of the psychological dimension of the teaching on emptiness.

For example, if you examine strong emotions like anger towards someone that you don't like, he says take some time to reflect upon what that anger looks like, what it feels like. When we get angry we know there are physiological signs. We also know that psychologically we feel disturbed. But what he is asking is to now, don't rush in. Observe. What is in that psychological experience. What is the perspective of that anger?

He says that it will soon reveal to us that when we have strong anger toward someone, a dislike toward someone, that dislike is really based on an attribution of a quality of unattractiveness of that person. Something that they did to us, something about the personality of that person. That unattractiveness is really, in this strong state of mind, an attribution of 100% black and white. This 100% black and white is what gives us this strong emotion.

Nagarjuna says that afflictions arise as a result of distorted perception and distorted perception is the attribution of the unattractive qualities that we're attributing here. Underlying this attribution of 100% undesirability or unattractiveness is the assumption of intrinsic existence of that person and the attributes of that person.

That's why he says it is important apply your understanding of emptiness in everyday life, especially in moments when there are strong emotions. When strong emotions arise we see the connection between afflictions and grasping much more powerfully.

For example, we know when we are too self-invested in a situation, in that situation if our self-agenda is so strong, then we tend to be much more vulnerable to things going wrong because of our investment of self in the situation. Because of this, when something goes wrong we get hurt more deeply. In all of this, whether in the context of an intimate relationship or in the context of relationship with difficult people, because there is an extreme attribution of qualities which are based upon assumption of intrinsic existence, our emotional reactivity also tends to be stronger, more intense. Of course, we know from personal experience when we give in to strong emotions, it often leads us to problems as well.

The point I'm trying to make is that the impact of teaching on emptiness and practice of emptiness should not be confined just to intellectual understanding that you develop through study and meditation that you conduct on your understanding. It should also include the application of the insights in everyday life. In this way, your study and understanding, your experience in meditation, and your application in everyday life, they reinforce each other. In

this way, we have a chance of getting gradually to this project of reaching this fundamental ignorance that Āryadeva, Nagarjuna, and Tsongkhapa are talking about.

That's why in Mahayana Buddhism there is so much fuss made about emptiness. There is so much fuss made about the teaching on wisdom to the point where the Heart Sutra, the representative of the Perfection of Wisdom sutras, is considered to be one of the most sacred and important scriptures in the Mahayana Buddhist world.

It is important to really look at the teaching of emptiness from all of these broader perspectives so you have an appreciation of why it matters. Because of this, for example, Nagarjuna says in his Fundamental Treatise on the Middle Way that the buddhas taught emptiness as a remedy to root out all forms of false views. He is really teaching on emptiness as the single remedy.

Similarly, at the end of his long text, Fundamental Treatise on the Middle Way… this text is unusual because normally most Buddhist texts have a salutation verse at the beginning, but *Fundamental Treatise on the Middle Way, Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, also has a salutation to the Buddha right at the end of the text:

> *I salute Gautama, who, based on compassion,*
> *taught the true Dharma for the abandonment of all views.*
>
> *- Nāgārjuna - Root Verses on the Middle Way, 27:30*

Nagarjuna is equating the teaching on emptiness as the true dharma. All the other teachings are complementary teachings that are there to help the truth of emptiness, the teaching of emptiness to be effective. The teaching on emptiness is really there primarily to help us all of our grasping and particularly the wrong views. Sometimes Nagarjuna also refers to the teaching on emptiness as nectar, Buddha's nectar, and I think it's really important to appreciate the curative aspects of the teaching of emptiness. It is not simply a philosophically rigorous teaching that is there to help us remove all the views, but it also has a curative dimension which is that helps us almost in the form of a medicine to get rid of a certain kind of fundamental ailment. I think this is really important.

Earlier I said how one of the important purposes of the teaching of emptiness is to bring to an end this conceptual chatter. Silencing of the conceptual elaboration. To sum up why emptiness matters, it is because it is emptiness that allows us to attain the silencing of the conceptual elaborations. To find true peace because it is the only door to liberation.

There is a very memorable passage in Aryadeva's text where he refers to emptiness as selflessness, another synonym for emptiness. He identifies three attributes of emptiness or three qualities of emptiness. He says:

> *Other than which there is no second door,*
> *and that which destroys all false views*

and is the object of all the buddhas—
this is what is called selflessness.

- Āryadeva - Four Hundred Verses, 12:13

He is basically saying selflessness or emptiness is the only door. There is no second door. It's the only door to liberation, so if one is serious about entering liberation, you have to go through that door. There is no second door. Secondly it destroys all false views, it is a remedy against all views. Third, it is the object of all the buddhas. That's what the buddhas want to teach. Therefore, emptiness is really the central focus of the teachings of these great masters.

Just to sum up, the key points of this first lesson, why emptiness matters, are:

- the root of afflictions and their resultant suffering is fundamental ignorance
- ignorance consists of grasping to objective intrinsic existence of both self and phenomena, not just self, but also the things around you
- wisdom of emptiness represents the directly opposing perspective of this ignorance and emptiness is the content of that wisdom
- understanding of this emptiness is key to liberation; there is no second door to liberation
- the cessation of this ignorance characterized as the silencing of conceptualization, vikalpa or namtok (Tibetan: རྣམ་རྟོག, Wylie: rnam rtog), is the result of the analysis presented in the Madhyamaka texts

Thank you.

2 – Tsongkhapa's Personal Quest for the View

9/23/2022

Welcome to lesson 2. In lesson 1, we discussed generally why emptiness matters. In this lesson, we'll be looking more specifically at Tsongkhapa's personal quest to find the view of emptiness. This is more of a story telling and an introduction to Tsongkhapa's own journey of finding the view.

First Factor: Deep study and Engagement with Classical Indian Texts

Tsongkhapa studied in central Tibetan and followed the general course of studies there. At the time of Tsongkhapa's student years in central Tibet the major monastic colleges were primarily studying four main disciplines.

1. Perfection of Wisdom studies
2. Abhidharma – both the Abhidharmakosha of Vasubandhu and Abhidharmasamuccaya of Asanga
3. Pramana – Logic and Epistemology based primarily on Dignaga and Dharmakirti's writings
4. Vinaya – the monastic ethics and vows

In his student years, Madhyamaka philosophy of emptiness does not seem to be part of the formal curriculum. If we look at Tsongkhapa's biography (Jinpa has written a modern bio called *A Buddha in the Land of Snows*) when he finished his formal studies and acquired the title of having done the academic scholarship, the title was Kashipa, a Master of Four Disciplines, just referred to.

The history shows that actually he and his teacher Rendawa were both deeply interested in Madhyamaka philosophy of emptiness. Even though Madhyamaka philosophy of emptiness was introduced in the early phase of the spread of Buddhism, but also during the Kadampa years, especially Patsap's translation of Chandrakirti's writings gave rise to the scholarship of Chandrakirti's works, but it turns out that somehow towards the end of the 14th century, Madhyamaka scholarship died down and did not make it into the formal curriculum. Both Rendawa and Tsongkhapa were really historically responsible for the resurgence of Madhyamaka scholarship in Tibet and particularly the emphasis that came to be placed on Chandrakirti's writing as representing the highest understanding of Nagarjuna's teachings. Both Rendawa and Tsongkhapa were responsible for this.

Tsongkhapa's biography shows that Tsongkhapa studied extensively with Rendawa, who at that time, was the greatest authority on Madhyamaka. Part of his quest for the view involved deep engagement with the great Madhyamaka texts of Nagarjuna, Aryadeva, Buddhapalita, Bhaviveka, and Chandrakirti. That study period was a very important part of Tsongkhapa's

quest. I won't go into the details of how he engaged in the details of these texts; those who wish can read this in the biography. Study and deep intellectual inquiry and delving deeper into this texts was an important part of [his quest].

Second Factor: Communicating with Manjushri

Another important factor for Tsongkhapa's quest for the middle view is his very intriguing relationship with his meditation deity, Manjushri, who eventually came to be recognized as a guru by him. I don't want to go into the details of this intriguing relationship between a nonhuman guru on the one hand and someone like Tsongkhapa on the other hand although the story is quite rich. Initially, Tsongkhapa's access to Manjushri came through the help of another master, Lama Umapa, who became one of Tsongkhapa's teachers as well as a student. Lama Umapa was a mystic who happened to have the facility to be able to act as a medium between Tsongkhapa and Manjushri. Many of the early communications with Manjushri were mediated by Lama Umapa. Gradually, Tsongkhapa himself came to have the vision of the meditation deity.

In any case, the point is that an important part of the story of how Tsongkhapa came to the realization of his view needs to include his access to and consultation with Manjushri. Many of the communications Tsongkhapa had with Manjushri, first through Lama Umapa, later by himself, and then at some point, one his own students, Tokden Jampel Gyatso became a medium and has another vision of Manjushri. So there were three sources through which he had access to Manjushri.

Themes discussed between Tsongkhapa and Manjushri:

- What is the object of negation in Madhyamaka?
- What remains in the wake of emptiness or what is the status of conventional reality?
- How do we distinguish between innate and other forms of grasping?
- What are the differences between Prasangika and Svatantrika?
- How do we know when we have found the view?

Interestingly, many of the questions that Tsongkhapa kept bringing to Manjushri really covered, from the Madhyamaka point of view, what exactly is being negated in the context of the teaching on emptiness. In other words, what is the object of negation? The second question that he constantly raised with Manjushri is, "What remains in the wake of emptiness?" In other words, what is the status of conventional truth / reality. The third question / theme he brought up is the distinction between innate and other forms of grasping, something we covered in lesson one. How do we get to the root of understanding what are those fundamental innate assumptions that we make. Another point he discussed with Manjushri is the differentiation

between Prasangika and Svatantrika view and if there are any differences in the subtlety of these two interpretations of Nagarjuna. Finally, how do we know when we have found the view? In other words, what is the measure of having found the view? Those were the constant themes.

The fact that Tsongkhapa had visions of Manjushri and had access to Manjushri seems to have been something that was quite well known during his time. This is attested to in Rendawa's writings. In one of his letters, Rendawa talks about Tsongkhapa's access to Manjushri and asks Tsongkhapa to ask for certain instructions from Manjushri. Tsongkhapa's collected writings contain a text that was inscribed from specific instructions requested on behalf of Rendawa to Manjushri and then delivered to Rendawa.

Then, Tsongkhapa's own personal letters, one of them addressed to Lama Umapa who then went back to Eastern Tibet, talks about Tsongkhapa's student Tokden Jampel Gyatso having visions of Manjushri and also talked about how the consultations with Manjushri through Lama Umapa acting as a medium has been so beneficial both in his inquiry into finding the view as well as his own meditative practice during the Wölkha Valley long retreat period. So, the fact that Tsongkhapa was known to have access to Mañjushri seems to have been quite well known during Tsongkhapa's lifetime. This is well attested to in the literature.

Of course, the biography is rich in telling the story of some of these encounters with Manjushri. There's a whole genre of Tsongkhapa's biography known as secret biography. "Secret biography" is contrasted to "conventional biography." The conventional biography tells the story of Tsongkhapa in conventional terms of his studies, meditation practice, attainments, but the secret biography, *sangwai namthar*, generally tend to focus more on the mystical aspects of the guru. In Tsongkhapa's case, a lot of the focus is on his access and communication and vision of Manjushri and also his visionary experiences of other meditational deities including Maitreya, and so on. There are two secret biographies. One was written by an attendant of Tsongkhapa named Lekpa Sangpo and the other one was written by one of Tsongkhapa's principal disciples, Khedrup Je.

Both of these two have huge overlaps, but they tend to tell the same kind of story. There is one very memorable scene I would like to mention here.

Towards the end of Lama Umapa's stay in Central Tibet, when he had decided to go back to Eastern Tibet, Tsongkhapa and Lama Umapa arrange to meetup in Lhasa and they decided to do a long retreat together. They shared the same house but had two separate cells for meditation, they were having breakfast and lunch together and as observant monks they were not having supper. It was during these breaks at breakfast and lunch that some of the most memorable encounters and spontaneous conversations with Manjushri through Umapa were recorded.

There is one scene where just as Lama Umapa was about to start heading back to Eastern Tibet, they arranged to have a teaching session on the rooftop of the Lhasa Jokhang, the cathedral. In the southeastern side under a shade, they setup an alter. There, at the beginning, Lama Umapa

receives a short Guhyasamaja empowerment from Tsongkhapa. Then Tsongkhapa receives teachings in turn from Lama Umapa, acting as a medium for Manjushri on the rooftop. There's an 18-line teaching we will use in one of the more reflective reading sessions we will do later. This is the final encounter. One of the questions Tsongkhapa asks is really about how to continue to persevere in his own quest for finding the view, again asking specific questions to Manjushri. Manjushri finally gives him an instruction or advice which I've translated in the biography. This is the deity speaking to Tsongkhapa:

> *Do not forget what I have taught you, and commit these to notes. You should (1) continue to supplicate the gurus and meditation deities and engage in sādhana practice; (2) strive in the dual practice of accumulating merit and purifying negative karma; and (3) reflect deeply on the meaning of the great treatises. Engage in your practice by combining these three things. Do not be easily satisfied but continue with your inquiry with sustained critical reflection. A time will come when what I have offered you here will act as the seed giving rise to a thorough understanding.*

Basically, Manjushri says now enough of asking questions to me. You have enough in terms of the teachings so what you need to do is combine three things. Continue to supplicate the gurus and meditation deities and do your sadhana practice. Then, also make sure you do purification practices of purifying negative karma and accumulating merit. Then, continue to deepen your engagement with the great Madhyamaka treatises and contemplate on their meaning. Then, the instructions Manjushri has given on the view will serve as the seed and Tsongkhapa will finally come to his own personal realization.

That, I think, is an important second factor. First was his study and then second was his conversations and instructions received from Manjushri.

Third Factor: Deep Meditative Practice

In addition to daily practice, which Tsongkhapa had maintained from his early childhood… those who remember his bio will know that from age 7 to 16 Tsongkhapa spent with his first teacher Chöjé Dhöndrup Rinchen in this beautiful high place, Jakhyung Monastery in Amdo province. Right from the beginning Chöjé Dhöndrup Rinchen introduced Tsongkhapa to meditative practice, the sadhanas, and he is supposed to have recited almost a billion times the mantra *oṃ a ra pa tsa na dhīḥ*, which is the Manjushri mantra. Then his daily practice was recitation of Manjushri name tantra (Mañjuśrīnāmasamgīti), and the Vajra Bhairava Yamantaka practice.

We also know from the biography that one of the things that Manjushri through Lama Umapa told him is that now the time has come for you to leave everything and go on a long retreat as a hermit. As a result, Tsongkhapa made the decision to go to the Wölkha Valley for an intensive retreat period and he was accompanied by eight close disciples, each one of who was identified by the deity to take along with him including Tokden Jampel Gyatso. They had separate cells or huts and they meditated at various places.

One of the interesting things about Tsongkhapa is that he was never really in the habit of staying too long in one place because he believed if you stay too long in one place, you get attached to the location.[3] In some ways, Tsongkhapa's style of moving from one place to another place is very similar to if you read the Buddha's biography from the Theravada sources. We know Buddha moved from one place to another and we can count how many rainy season retreats he spent in different places and Buddha along with his disciples were constantly moving. Tsongkhapa's lifestyle until Ganden monastery was established way later towards the end of his life was very similar. He never set roots in one place. Even in Wölkha Valley he moved around to various hermitages and retreat places.

In any case, he was there in the Wölkha Valley region for almost three years. During this period, typical chadelwa (?) is the Tibetan word, chadelwa means "do nothing." Someone who has nothing to do. Chadelwa is absence of activity. They adapted this lifestyle. In the beginning, they were quite strict with respect to even food. They adopted an ascetic lifestyle which involved not having any hot meals. They lived on simply cold cereals and meal. Gradually, some of Tsongkhapa's disciples including himself, their health got affected, so they changed. But even then, true of the meditators including Tokden Jampel Gyatso remained ascetic and avoided eating hot meals for a long time.

At the beginning, Tsongkhapa was very insistent that except for Tokden Jampel Gyatso who had direct connection with Manjushri, who was allowed a small image of Manjushri and a text on Sakya Lamdre cycle of teachings which he had just received; all the other meditators were very strict in maintaining single pointed focus on the foundational practices of purification, cultivation of bodhicitta, cultivation of universal compassion and delving deeper into cultivating the view. Those were the main focus, not tantra, in the initial stage.

Over a period of three years, Tsongkhapa's experience deepened powerfully, his devotional experience deepened tremendously, especially after the restoration of the Dzingchi Maitreya temple. He was always known to have a very stable single-pointedness of mind. His ability to remain completely undisturbed, single-pointed in a shamatha state was very very well known. But that also got deepened powerfully during the retreat period. Also, many of his vajrayana practices got very deep advances.

But one area where Tsongkhapa felt less satisfaction is on the question of finding the view. Even after three years of retreat, Tsongkhapa, when he left the Wölkha Valley region he felt there was still work that needed to be done.

[3] 37 practices of a Bodhisattva vs 2 and 3:

Attachment toward our close ones stirs us up like water.
Aggression toward our enemies burns us like fire.
Dark with ignorance, we forget what to adopt or reject.
To abandon one's homeland is the practice of a bodhisattva. (2)

When we abandon negative places, the afflictions gradually diminish.
In the absence of any distraction, virtuous activity naturally increases.
Through clear awareness, certainty in the dharma arises.
To keep to solitary places is the practice of a bodhisattva. (3)

Breakthrough

Tsongkhapa comes back to the Wölkha Valley for another long retreat and this time he stayed for almost two years. It was during this period that he had that Eureka moment, if I can call it that. That was preceded by a prophetic dream one night. He dreamt of Nagarjuna in conversation with five of his disciples, entering into discourse on emptiness. One of the Indian monks, Buddhapalita, stood up and placed a text on Tsongkhapa's head. That was his dream.

Next morning he woke up in a very blissful state of mind, quite elated, remembering the dream. That day, coincidentally, one of the monks who came to see him offered him a text of Buddhapalita's commentary on Nagarjuna's Fundamental Treatise on the Middle Way. The commentary title is the same as his name—Buddhapalita. He immediately saw the auspiciousness of that coincidence of his dream and someone bringing this text to him. He sat down and plunged into a deep reading of the text.

At a certain point, almost like a bolt of lightning, the view came to him in a powerful way. At that point, it was almost as if there was a sense of freedom which was tinged with a tremendous elation and joy. That sense of freedom was almost as if everything was okay now. The best way to describe this is to really say that now Tsongkhapa understood experientially what Nagarjuna meant when he said:

> *For whom emptiness is possible,*
> *Everything is possible.*
> *For whom emptiness is not possible,*
> *Nothing is possible.*
>
> *- Nagarjuna - Root Verses on the Middle Way, 24:14*

So, the understanding of the entire world, reality, from the perspective of emptiness, how everything now makes sense. On top of that, he also felt this tremendous freedom which released him from the urge to seek some kind of objective grounding, something to hold onto, something to grasp onto. There was no need at all. That sense of freedom was very very powerful.

Of course, when he initially the powerful tone of that experience was really that of joy, a gratitude to the Buddha for teaching emptiness. In that joyful state of mind, he actually wrote one of the most important hymns to the Buddha. Today, it is known as *In Praise of Dependent Origination* and the actual title is *Essence of Eloquence*. Let me read a few passages from that text just to give a sense of his enthusiasm and the immediacy of that experience of joy.

> *Whatever degenerations there are in the world,*
> *The root of all these is ignorance.*
> *You taught dependent origination,*
> *The seeing of which will undo this ignorance.*

He's using the word dependent origination as a synonym for emptiness here.

So how can an intelligent person
Not comprehend that this path
Of dependent origination is
The essential point of your teaching?

This being so, who will find, O Savior,
A more wonderful way to praise you
Than [to praise you] for having taught
This origination through dependence?

Wondrous teacher! Wondrous refuge!
Wondrous speaker! Wondrous savior!
I pay homage to you, the teacher
Who taught well dependent origination.

Now he goes into more specifics on what the teaching on dependent origination is:

"All of this is devoid of essence"
And "From this arises that effect."
These two certainties complement
Each other with no conflict at all.

What is more amazing than this?
What is more marvelous than this?
If one praises you in this manner,
This is a real praise, otherwise it is not.

At the heart of this revelation, he is saying, is this equation between emptiness on the one hand and dependent origination on the other. One reflects the other. Dependent origination and emptiness are two sides of the same coin. Not only are they not in conflict, but they are actually the same thing. So he is really expressing his sense of wonder and appreciating that equation, the power of that equation.

Then he speaks more specifically about himself:

Alas! My mind was defeated by ignorance;
Though I have sought refuge for a long time
In such an embodiment of excellence,
I possess not a fraction of your qualities.

He is expressing his humility.

Nonetheless, that I have found some faith
In you before the stream of this life,
Flowing toward death, has come to cease—
Even this I think is fortunate.

Among teachers, the teacher of dependent origination,
Among wisdoms, the knowledge of dependent origination—
You, who are most excellent like the kings in the worlds,
Know this perfectly well, not others.

You can see the sense of immediacy, the joy, the feeling of gratitude and sense of wonder as well. The tone in this. This is the point when he wrote this, in the immediate aftermath of when he found the view. Finding the view is of course, not to say that until that point Tsongkhapa did not intellectually understand what emptiness is. He had studied the great Madhyamaka texts quite deeply. He had meditated. He had access to Manjushri. It was not a question of intellectual understanding.

The question really was about an experiential understanding of having found the view. Finding the view in a way that really made sense to him at the visceral level. How do you understand emptiness on the one hand and the reality of conventional truth on the other? How do you square this nonexistence in the ultimate sense and existence on the conventional sense. Also, what does emptiness mean in relation to the entire aspect of the Buddha's path to enlightenment. The everyday life. The importance of differentiating between right and wrong, good and bad, morality, and also the soteriological path to enlightenment. I think this is where Tsongkhapa was trying to get a visceral sense of what it means in an experiential way.

Once the initial stage of this state of mind permeated by gratitude and joy was over, during which he wrote that beautiful, moving poem, a hymn to Buddha, which, by the way, today is a standalone treatise on emptiness and those who wish to study a short text on emptiness, I think studying this text is actually quite effective and helpful. In fact, there are numerous important commentaries written on this Praise of Dependent Origination. Anyway, once things settled down, Tsongkhapa wanted to work out what it means, what this new realization means.

I think here, the important thing is it's one thing to have an experiential finding of the view which comes suddenly, spontaneously, like a bolt of lightning. It is something else to flesh it out. Here Tsongkhapa was not content just to have the experience. He really wanted to, in some sense, understand what that experience means. Understand what that new realization of emptiness which took the form of an equation between emptiness and dependent origination really means. How can he flesh it out so that others in the future can also replicate what he has found?

Here, I think really began the methodical process of spelling it out, what that experience entailed and what it means. Also, as a philosopher, Tsongkhapa was not content with simply

stating that the Madhyamaka view of emptiness represents the highest perspective of truth. He wants to flesh out what that means. More importantly, he wants to draw out the implications of the teachings of emptiness because historically, the teachings of emptiness have been accused of being nihilistic. So, finding that fine line where you don't veer into the extreme of existence and absolutism but also you don't go on the opposite direction and slide into nihilism and non-existence, where is that fine line? Can one even conceptually articulate that? Tsongkhapa was very keen on finding that.

In any case, Madhyamaka view of emptiness is called *madhyamaka*—middle way. So where is that middle? That line may be very very thin, but there has to be a middle because you cannot go into either of the extremes because the madhyamaka view of emptiness is supposed to transcend all forms of extremes, especially existence and nonexistence.

Then, as a teacher and someone who emphasized the practice of universal compassion, Tsongkhapa was also very keen to make sure that he wrote this down so that future students and scholars can also benefit from what he had just experienced.

All of that meant that he needed to now embark on a careful process of writing. Over time, Tsongkhapa came to write five major texts on Madhyamaka known today as *Five Great Madhyamaka Texts of Tsongkhapa*.

The first one, written around two years after Tsongkhapa's finding the view eureka moment at Reting Hermitage, is the insight section on Tsongkhapa's Lamrim Chenmo, *Great Treatise on the Stages of Enlightenment*. We have a translation of the Lamrim Chenmo in three volumes. The final volume is on shamatha and insight section of that text. The insight section of that text is the first major Madhyamaka treatise that Tsongkhapa wrote.

The second one is *Essence of Eloquence*, the treatise on differentiating the definitive and provisional meaning of Buddha's sutras. The third is Tsongkhapa's extensive commentary [called *Ocean of Reasoning*] on Nagarjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way. The fourth one is the insight section on Tsongkhapa's *Middle Length Lamrim, Stages of the Path*, the translation of which just came out last year. Then the final text on Madhyamaka is Tsongkhapa's commentary called *Illuminating the Intent* on Chandrakirti's text *Entering the Middle Way*, which I had the honor to translate and which came out about a year and a half ago.

Tsongkhapa's Five Madhyamaka Texts – Overview

Now I will briefly explain the uniqueness of each of these texts because one of the admirable qualities of Tsongkhapa is that he doesn't like to repeat himself. If he had covered something extensively in one text, in another text, he will simply refer to the previous text instead of repeating what he had said elsewhere. These five texts complement each other. I will briefly identify the uniqueness of each of these texts is because one of the aims of this course is to

help you to have a guide to engage with these texts so you can more focused efficient in your reading.

1: Insight section in Great Treatise

This is the first time, other than his short hymn to the Buddha, that Tsongkhapa is now writing on emptiness. The insight section is quite substantial and in this, not only is he articulating what he experienced, but he is doing so in the context of the views of interpretations of emptiness that had been proposed in Tibet before his time. He is situating this in the broader context and also brings into the conversation the presentations of the great Madhyamaka masters, particularly Nagarjuna, Aryadeva, and Chandrakirti and he really uses Chandrakirti and Buddhapalita as the two key interpreters of Nagarjuna and Aryadeva. That is his approach.

In the insight section of Lamrim Chenmo, one of the most important topics he really addresses extensively is the question of identifying what is being negated. He uses two main headings. (1) The problem of over-negation. If you go overboard then you slide into nihilism. (2) The problem of under-negation. If you don't negate enough, then you leave residual realism and objective truth, facts. In this way, the first important topic he covers is an extensive discussion on what exactly is the delineation of what is being negated and what is not being negated. This is important topic.

The second topic is the status of conventional truth. In the wake of what is being negated in the context of emptiness, how do we then make sense of the actual reality of the world? The lived reality of everyday experience and samsara and nirvana and all of this. This is, again, ensuring that you are not throwing everything away. There is a robust understanding of reality. Part of that is another point which involves distinguishing between existence and intrinsic existence. Intrinsic existence is being negated, existence per se is not being negated. The distinction between existence and intrinsic existence.

Another theme he addresses extensively in the insight section is the distinction between Svatantrika and Prasangika Madhyamaka in their interpretation of Nagarjuna's thought. We will have a separate class on this. Ostensibly it is really on what is the best way to cultivate the view, generate the view of emptiness, whether using a *syllogistic* form of reasoning, or whether using a *reductio ad absurdum* style of argument. That's on the surface of the methodological difference. But is there something deeper in the difference between the two interpretations that is reflected in their choice of methodology. This distinction between Svatantrika and Prasangika represented by Bhaviveka for the first and Chandrakirti for the second takes up quite a big space in the insight section.

Another important theme in the insight section of the Lamrim Chenmo is the practical side. Tsongkhapa develops in a very methodical way the stages in the meditation of cultivating the view of selflessness. Here, he chooses the person as the focus because he says that between person and phenomena, person is more intimate to us, the notion of self and "I". When we engage in meditation on emptiness, instead of choosing some external object that is out there,

it is more effective to choose your own sense of self, your own personal existence as the focus and he presents in a very methodical way the stages in that practice of cultivating the view of no-self in relation to your own existence.

After that is a very important section is what then is the perspective on self or person or existence that we will have and we should have in the aftermath of doing the deconstruction of emptiness. Here, the reference to the illusion-like character of reality. That is an important theme and there's a beautiful section of the Lamrim Chenmo where he goes into quite detail what does it mean to say that our perspective on the world now will have that illusion-like character.

Then, another important topic in the Lamrim Chenmo is in the practice section where Tsongkhapa really emphasizes the need for discursive analytic approach in meditation on emptiness. Before him, there was a tendency on the part of many Tibetan traditions and teachers to say discursivity and analysis is relevant only when you are studying and developing intellectual understanding but when you come to sit down in a formal sitting meditation, then you drop everything and only adopt resting the mind practice. Tsongkhapa was really adamant that this is not right and in fact, what differentiates emptiness meditation from a typical shamatha meditation is that shamatha is predominantly resting the mind and insight meditation must necessarily involve generation of insight which is a function of delving deeper through inquiry.

So, Tsongkhapa develops a beautiful presentation of how as you advance in your practice of emptiness, you will find a finer and finer balance between these mutually reinforcing approaches of discursive analysis occurring on one hand and resting the mind on the arrived at conclusion on the other. When the conclusion and sense of certainty of absence of independent existence or emptiness wanes, then you refresh it with another application of inquiry. As inquiry leads you to insight then you rest your mind. There's a beautiful balanced application that is presented. That's an important part of the insight section.

Therefore, the insight section is a lengthy one and it is really worth reading the key sections. We will have suggested reading in these classes from this text.

2: Essence of Eloquence

This is a much shorter text, just over 100 folios. Ostensibly, it is a hermeneutic text. By *hermeneutic* I'm talking about theory of interpretation. Hermeneutic is really the interpretation of Buddha's scriptures. Mahayana Buddhism is famous for having a huge collection of sutras. In the Tibetan Kangyur collection there are over 100 volumes all attributed to the Buddha. When you have that size of a canon, of course there are going to be a lot of conflicting statements at least on the surface. Then, how do you adjudicate between these different statements. Which one is to be taken literally and which are to not be taken literally?

That differentiation is a hermeneutic or interpretation issue and Tsongkhapa wrote this text primarily to offer us a systematic approach to find that differentiation of definitive and interpretable. His suggestion is to recognize two main approaches. (1) The Yogachara or Mind-Only approach which emphasizes understanding the nature of reality primarily in terms of what is called the three-nature theory. The imputed nature, the dependent nature, and the perfected nature. Versus (2) the Madhyamaka approach which emphasizes the framework of the two truths.

The text itself is divided into roughly three parts. The first part is introduction. The second part is on Yogachara's understanding of how to read scriptures as interpretive or definitive. The third part is the Madhyamaka section which is divided into two parts. The first part is the general Madhyamaka covering Nagarjuna and Aryadeva as the two main masters of the tradition whose authority is shared across all the Madhyamaka interpreters. Then the second part goes more specifically into the Svatrantika and Prasangika section.

The text is structured in these ways, but what is really important in this text is it makes the point that in the end, differentiation of Buddha's teachings into definitive versus provisional can only be done on the basis of some kind of reasoning, not based on scriptures. If you base that differentiation on a scripture, then the question arises on what ground do we take that differentiating scriptures as definitive? If that requires another scripture, then you have an infinite regress problem. Tsongkhapa says in the end, when we're dealing with the nature of reality, the nature of reality needs to be addressed through our understanding and reasoning.

In the Madhyamaka section Tsongkhapa revisits the important distinction between Svatantrika and Prasangika. In the text itself they are separated sections and the differences between the two is fleshed out more specifically again, even though he covered it in the insight section [of the Lamrim Chenmo], in this text he does it quite explicitly again.

This treatise is probably among all of Tsongkhapa's writings on Madhyamaka the most influential one so developing some familiarity with this treatise is quite important.

3: Ocean of Reasoning – Commentary on the Fundamental Treatise on the Middle Way

Because this is a formal commentary on Nagarjuna's text, the structure follows exactly the structure of Nagarjuna's text. I'd like to draw attention to two sections of the text.

Right in the beginning, there's an opening section following commentary on the salutation verse which is a very lengthy section that stands almost as a standalone introduction to emptiness, a treatise. It is quite extensive and this covers many important topics like what exactly is emptiness, what is being negated in the context of emptiness, the nature of the negation itself.

When we say emptiness we're talking about something being negated, what exactly is the logical status or structure of that negation? This is the distinction between what is called the implicative negation and nonimplicative negation.

Implicative negation, in the wake of negating something, implies something. For example, if you say, in the context of someone who is either a Brahmin or a commoner, if you say, "This person is not a Brahmin," then immediately even though the explicit statement is negative, it is a negation, but it implies something in the aftermath. Nonimplicative negation is a simple negation which does not imply anything in the wake of negation. This logical distinction between the two is an important part of the introductory section.

Also, the introductory section deals again with the fine point of where can we draw the line about existence of conventional truths. That's an important point.

Another section in the text is in the beginning of the second chapter and towards the end as well, Tsongkhapa goes into analysis of the actual structure of the argument presented in the coming and going analysis and he says that this analysis of the actual structure of the logical argument is applicable to many other subsequent chapters.

Also, because Tsongkhapa is relying very heavily on Chandrakirti's reading of Nagarjuna so in his commentary on Nagarjuna's text, he is also bringing Chandrakirti's own commentary which is called *Clear Words*, *Prasannapadā*, into the discussion. One of the things Tsongkhapa does every now and then is to remind the reader that here again is evidence that suggests that Chandrakirti or Nagarjuna is not rejecting reality as a whole, pointing out that these masters maintain a robust notion of the conventional truth.

He frequently reminds us of this, and this is partly because before him there has been a certain influential strand of reading Chandrakirti which seems to suggest that Chandrakirti does not accept conventional truth as part of reality. Conventional truths are perspectives of only ignorant mind and so once the ignorance is removed, there will be no conventional reality. Tsongkhapa does not really accept that kind of nihilistic reading of Chandrakirti so every now and then he will seize an opportunity to point out that here is yet another statement that shows that Chandrakirti clearly has a robust notion of conventional truth.

These two are important sections of this text.

4: Middle-Length Stages of the Path – Insight Section

Here, there is of course, a kind of repetition because he is now writing a shorter version of his first Great Treatise of the Stages of the path. This is a shorter version and there is some repetition, but on the other hand, there are two important sections in this insight section of the Middle-Length which were not in the Great Treatise.

One is a formal presentation on the two truths, which is missing in the Lamrim Chenmo. The second topic where there is more explicit discussion is the stages of non-mentation, nondiscursive resting mind in relation to emptiness. This is important because sometimes among the Gelug commentators, there is a tendency to reject all forms of non-mentation as being not a legitimate form of meditation practice.

Tsongkhapa has a much more nuanced position. He admits that there are occasions where there could be a genuine meditative experience of emptiness that has this character of having no mentation, nondiscursive. This whole debate on non-mentation is an important one but he says that there can be a genuine meditation practice of non-mentation type on emptiness, but that presupposes that the practitioner has a deep intellectual understanding of emptiness so that the person is simply recalling the understanding and resting the mind totally non-discursively on that state. In any case, this is an important section of the Middle Length Insight section.

5: Illuminating the Intent: Commentary on Chandrakirti's Entering the Middle Way

The structure of this text follows the structure of Chandrakirti's Entering the Middle Way. There are 11 chapters, but one of the important things about this particular text is that this was completed just a year before Tsongkhapa's nirvana which means this text really represents the mature standpoint of Tsongkhapa when it comes to Madhyamaka philosophy.

There's a beautiful section on identifying the object of negation. Although he covered it extensively in the Lamrim Chenmo, the first major text on Madhyamaka, but here he presents it in a very succinct way by differentiating between the Svatantrika and Prasangika texts and also pointing their choice of analogies.

In Madhyamaka Svatantrika, the preferred analogy is the magician's conjuration of animals from pebbles and so on and how spectators whose eyes have been conditioned by the magician's spell see animals [illusions] and those whose eyes are not affected by the spell do not see anything. The magician sees the conjuration but does not believe in it. That's the analogy used in the Madhyamaka Svatantrika section.

In the Madhyamaka Prasangika section, the preferred analogy used is the image of the coiled rope. In a not well-lit room or a corner of a room you see a striped rope coiled up, your immediate instinct is to fear there is a snake there. That analogy is beautifully explained. The point is that identifying the object of negation is an important section of this text.

Another important section of this text is somewhere in the middle where there are three key arguments throwing consequences by Chandrakirti to others who accept on the conventional level the notion of intrinsic reality or arising. Tsongkhapa uses those three consequences as a way of really fleshing out exactly what is the subtle point that Chandrakirti is raising when critiquing svalakshana, which is intrinsic characteristic, which will be discussed later. The way

Tsongkhapa reads that section as pointing out something unique about Chandrakirti's position makes this an important section.

Then, because Chandrakirti's text has a critique of the alaya foundational consciousness, Tsongkhapa's discussion of that is quite extensive. Chandrakirti's text has a very explicit critique of Yogachara epistemology including reflexive awareness, self-cognition. So, again here, Tsongkhapa's treatment of this is quite extensive.

Chandrakirti, unlike other Madhyamaka texts, contains quite lengthy sections on the first five chapters on the method aspect of the path because the first six chapters are modeled on the six perfections. There is quite an explicit focus on the non-emptiness aspect of the Mahayana practice and Tsongkhapa, in commenting on those sections, draws extensively on Nagarjuna's writings, especially Ratnavali, Precious Garland, which is a text written in the form of a letter to a King. Also, Nagarjuna's Sūtrasamuccaya, Compendium of Sutras. Those two major texts from Nagarjuna which have much more explicit presentations of non-emptiness themes. These are important unique aspects of the final work of Tsongkhapa.

I feel that it is helpful to point out and highlight these to you so that as you read these texts you appreciate what is unique about these texts.

Conclusion

In these writings, Tsongkhapa strives to not only explain his understanding of what emptiness is, but more importantly he strives to draw out the implications of that understanding of emptiness. Especially from the Prasangika point of view—the implications of what it means to say that nothing possesses intrinsic existence; what it means to say that in relation to morality; in relation to everyday experience; in relation to the path to enlightenment. In all of these, Tsongkhapa strives to flesh them out so that the practitioner and the student can also have a much more comprehensive understanding of emptiness so that it is not confined just to the view, but the view's implication for all other areas.

In class 1, I emphasized the need to situate your understanding of emptiness with the broader context of the Mahayana Buddhist framework of ground, path, and result. I made the point that the core of the path is the wisdom of emptiness and the method aspects like compassion and so on are complementary factors. So, Tsongkhapa really wants to make the point that a genuine understanding of emptiness should not undermine one's commitment to the method aspects of the path, one's commitment to morality, one's commitment to the path to enlightenment.

In fact, a genuine and deep understanding of emptiness must reinforce one's devotion to the gurus, devotion to the Buddha, commitment to the path because in the end, emptiness is the final explanation, final explanatory principle for the reality of everything. So Tsongkhapa really wants to flesh this out so our understanding of emptiness is comprehensive, robust, and also deeply felt. In these writings Tsongkhapa strives to present these so that future generations have a chance to understand them in a methodical systematic way.

Thank you.

Verses for Meditation Practice

Lesson 2: Tsongkhapa's Personal Quest for the View

Opening: settling the mind practice

Mañjuśrī's eighteen-line instruction (TSK bio, p. 131-32):

Without abiding anywhere,
Contemplate your mind as space-like.
Strive in all complementary practices.

Remaining alone like a rhinoceros,
discard all distractions
and, abiding within equipoise,
approach the great awakening.

The fruition of karma is never in doubt.
Cultivate renunciation and bodhicitta.
Keeping ablaze the great fire of mindfulness,
the fuel of six objects will definitely be consumed.

No phenomena, of either samsara or nirvana,
ever were nor will be perceived;
like space they transcend all boundaries.
The appearance of objects resembles sky flowers;
as for mind, the subject, which buddha has found such a thing?

The oneness of space and awareness is proven by the son of a childless woman;
these truths constitute the path of the conquerors.

3 – What Exactly is Emptiness?

10/7/2022

Welcome to Lesson 3. In the first two classes, we looked at two themes. (1) Why Emptiness Matters, (2) Tsongkhapa's journey into finding the view of emptiness. We learned that emptiness represents the ultimate nature of reality, that realization of true wisdom whose content is emptiness represents the directly opposing perspective of ignorance, and how realization of emptiness is key to liberation, and how the view of emptiness is the antidote to all metaphysical views that presuppose or are premised on the belief in objective intrinsic existence.

In class 3, we now come to the actual topic of what exactly is emptiness? A good place to start in trying to understand what exactly is emptiness is Nagarjuna's Fundamental Treatise on the Middle Way especially chapter 24 [An Analysis of the Noble Truths], verse 7. In this section, beginning with verse 7, Nagarjuna is responding to possible critiques of his teaching on emptiness from fellow Buddhists who accuse the teaching on emptiness as representing a form of nihilism involving the rejection of many of the themes that are so sacred to Buddhism such as the Four Noble Truths, the Three Jewels, and so on and so forth. Nagarjuna opens his response with the following stanza:

> *Here we say that you do not understand*
> *the purpose of [the teaching of] emptiness,*
> *emptiness itself, and the meaning of emptiness;*
> *in this way you are thus frustrated.*
>
> *Nāgārjuna - Root Verses on The Middle Way, 24:7*

He's basically responding to his fellow Buddhists who criticize the view of emptiness as being nihilistic and involving rejection and negation of the Four Noble Truths and so on as actually having misunderstood three important things: (1) what is the purpose or point of the teaching on emptiness, (2) what exactly is emptiness? (3) what is the meaning of the word emptiness?

Here, let's look at how Chandrakirti, one of the most influential commentators of Nagarjuna's Treatise on the Middle Way, understands these three points that Nagarjuna is raising. In explaining what the point or purpose of the teaching on emptiness is, Chandrakirti says the purpose of the teaching of emptiness is bringing about the cessation of conceptual elaboration. We already talked about that as an important function of the teaching of emptiness in lesson 1.

Regarding the second point, where the Buddhist realists fail to understand what exactly emptiness is, Chandrakirti says that emptiness does not mean nonexistence. Emptiness refers to the nonexistence of intrinsic reality. He defines what nonexistence applies to. He explains that emptiness is not the same as nonexistence.

With respect to the third point, which is the meaning of the word emptiness, he says the meaning of the word is dependent origination.

Out of these three, the second point really relates to, if one can call it, the definition of what emptiness is.

Definition of Ultimate Reality / Emptiness: Five Attributes

Here Chandrakirti refers the reader to an earlier passage from Nagarjuna in chapter 18 [An Analysis of the Self], verse 9 where Nagarjuna gives a definition of what ultimate truth is. Chandrakirti refers to this verse for us to look for the definition of what ultimate truth is. For Chandrakirti, emptiness is the ultimate truth. This definition of ultimate truth for him is also a definition of what emptiness is. I read the stanza from Nagarjuna:

> *Not to be known from another person,*
> *free [from intrinsic nature],*
> *not postulated through elaboration,*
> *devoid of falsifying conceptualization,*
> *not having many separate meanings—*
> *this is the nature of reality.*
>
> *Nāgārjuna - Root Verses on The Middle Way, 18:9*

In this passage, Nagarjuna identifies five attributes of the definition of ultimate truth. (1) is that it is not known from another person (aparapratyayaṃ), so it is something that needs to be known by the yogin personally through personal experience. (2) He characterizes it as free (śāntam) and "free" is glossed as free from intrinsic nature or existence. (3) It is not postulated through conceptual elaboration (prapañcair aprapañcitam). (4) It is devoid of falsifying conceptualization (nirvikalpam). (5) Not having many separate meanings (anānārtham).

One thing that we have to note here is that all of these attributes of ultimate truth or emptiness that Nagarjuna identifies are completely negative. None of them are affirmative. That's an important point to bear in mind as we think about what exactly emptiness is.

Chandrakirti's Gloss of the Five Attributes of Ultimate Truth

Here, Chandrakirti glosses these characteristics. The first one, (1) not to be known from another person, is straightforward—you cannot know it from another person, you have to know it yourself. He glosses the third characteristic as freedom from intrinsic existence. The Sanskrit term is śāntam.

Then, (5) not having multiple meaning which is anānārtham, Chandrakirti glosses this as having a single taste. This is something that we briefly alluded to earlier, the contrast between

conventional truth and ultimate truth is that ultimate truth is single. It is a single taste. It is unitary. There is no multiple meaning when it comes to the nature of reality. The multiplicity and diversity arises only at the level of conventional truth. Anything that is ultimate truth cannot have multiple meaning. This is why absence of many separate meanings is important. Then, (4) devoid of falsifying conceptualization Chandrakirti glosses this as something where there is no conceptual activity with respect to elaboration. With respect to ultimate truth, you cannot elaborate. Ultimate truth is simple absence.

Then, (3) not postulated through conceptual elaboration he glosses this as something that cannot be uttered or expressed in terms of words.

These five attributes that are part of the definition of ultimate truth, Chandrakirti explains that the latter explains the former. In other words, according to Chandrakirti's reading, (5) not having multiple meanings explains why (4) it is devoid of falsifying conceptualization because there is no multiple meaning; there is only one meaning. Because (4) it is devoid of falsifying conceptualization, (3) it cannot be postulated through conceptual elaboration. Because (3) it cannot be postulated through conceptual elaboration, (2) it is free of intrinsic nature. Chandrakirti explains that the latter indicates or points towards the former.

Buddhapalita's Gloss of the Five Attributes of Ultimate Truth

Buddhapalita, on the other hand, provides a more complex reading. He suggests that because (4) it is devoid of conceptual elaboration, (3) it cannot be postulated through concepts. Because it (3) it cannot postulated through concepts, (2) it is free of intrinsic nature. Because (2) it is free of intrinsic nature, (5) there are no multiple separate meanings. That's how Buddhapalita glosses this verse. He says that such a truth can only be known by the yogins personally and not from others.

Negative or Affirmative Approaches to Emptiness

In any case, the point to remember is both Buddhapalita and Chandrakirti, the two very influential commentators of Nagarjuna read this important passage from Nagarjuna's Treatise as presenting the only definition of emptiness or ultimate truth. Both authors agree that all the attributes including (1) not to be known from another, are entirely in negative terms, in terms of negation. None of them are in affirmative language. I think this is really important.

Of course, this reminds us of the profusion of negative language in the Perfection of Wisdom Sutras. Those of us who are familiar with the Heart Sutra will know that the Heart Sutra often sounds like a string of negative terms like no ear, no eyes, no nose and so on. If you don't fully understand the importance of the teaching on emptiness, then you do not appreciate the significance of using such negations. This is an important point to keep in mind.

It is sources like these, both in the Perfection of Wisdom sutras as well as the great Indian Madhyamaka masters such as Nagarjuna, Chandrakirti, Aryadeva, and Buddhapalita that Tsongkhapa really insist on as characterizing emptiness purely in terms of negative language, language of *via negativa*. Also, understanding even from a logical character point of view in negative terms. This is really important. Not only a form of negation, but also what he calls nonimplicative form of negation. The negation involved in emptiness is that of a categorical simple negation which does not imply anything in the aftermath of negation. It's an absolute categorical simple negation with no implications in the aftermath of the negation. Tsongkhapa insists that if you look at the Indian sources of Madhyamaka, emptiness is best characterized as a form of such a negation.

Historically in Tibet, if you look at the ways in which the Tibetan tradition has understood the teaching on emptiness, one could broadly identify two camps. The camp which Tsongkhapa belongs that emphasizes Nagarjuna's writings, particularly so-called The Analytic Corpus which includes The Treatise on the Middle Way, Sixty Stanzas on Reasoning, Seventy Stanzas on Emptiness, and so forth. This is a collection of six texts referred to as The Analytic Corpus. Those who emphasize that collection of resources for the Madhyamaka teachings on emptiness, they tend to emphasize the *via negativa* approach to understanding emptiness and characterization of emptiness in terms of negation. Sometimes in philosophical language, we call it apophatic approach.

There is also another camp among Tibetan masters, a tradition which suggests a more cataphatic, affirmative approach to understanding the ultimate nature of reality, including emptiness. This group tends to emphasize not so much Madhyamaka writings, but instead Maitreya's collection of texts, especially Ratnagotravibhāga aka The Sublime Continuum aka The Uttaratantra.

According to this group, even Nagarjuna's own ultimate position is represented not so much in the analytic corpus, which is really for the logical establishment of the truth of emptiness, but the more experiential yogic perspective emerges in the Collection of Hymns, particularly the Hymn to the Expanse of Reality,[4] Dharmadhātustava which is attributed to Nagarjuna. Of course, it's attribution is problematic, but the second camp that emphasizes Maitreya's collection of writings also suggests that Nagarjuna's own views on ultimate view of reality emerges in the Collection of Hymns, not so much in the logical texts.

Among Nagarjuna's hymns, except for Dharmadhātustava, Hymn to the Expanse of Reality, the other hymns it is difficult to say there is a cataphatic approach to emptiness. The language is very similar to The Analytic Corpus. But the Dharmadhātustava, for me personally, it is very difficult to justify its attribution to Nagarjuna. The teaching and the tone and the language is so different from Nagarjuna's mainstream writing.

[4] Translated by Karl Brunnhölzl here.

But as to Maitreya's collection of texts, whether or not Maitreya's texts themselves provide strong support for developing a more affirmative language to dealing with ultimate truth, that's a sort of exegetically complicated question. It's not a done deal. Although the group that would like to emphasize the more affirmative approach to understanding emptiness would like to use Maitreya's text as the Indian sources, but the reading of these texts, at least on the surface, we find it difficult to justify a more cataphatic approach to describing the ultimate nature of reality.

Coincidentally, those who emphasize Nagarjuna's Analytic Corpus and the *via negativa* approach, they also propound what is called the Rangtong intrinsic emptiness theory. Those who prioritize the Maitreya collection of texts and suggest a more affirmative approach to understanding the ultimate nature of reality, they also are coincidentally proponents of Shentong, the extrinsic view of emptiness. That's something that is part of the history which is important to understand as a backdrop to this whole debate.

Now, those who emphasize the Shentong approach tend to boil it down to basically arguing that the ultimate nature of reality is ultimately a nondual gnosis, a wisdom that is both the expanse as well as a gnostic state. Therefore, it cannot be characterized as a simple negation so it is a whole different take on how do you understand the word "ultimate reality," dharmatā.

Setting that aside, within the first camp that emphasizes Nagarjuna's Analytic Corpus and emphasize the approach of *via negativa*, even there we can distinguish between two camps. (1) The camp that Tsongkhapa belongs to, and Ngok Loden Sherab, the great translator, as well as Chapa Chokyi Senge, the great logician and possibly Sakya Pandita and Rendawa in this camp too.

This camp which includes Tsongkhapa would really look at emptiness primarily in terms of a nonimplicative negation. Essentially emptiness is the emptiness of intrinsic existence, pure and simple. It's a categorical, full, total, comprehensive, elimination of intrinsic existence.

The second group, of which Gorampa was one of the important voices of critique of Tsongkhapa, tend to although agree the via negativa approach is important and also understand that some form of negation is involved, but this second group argues that absence of intrinsic existence, this nonimplicative negation, does not fully capture emptiness. They say absence of intrinsic existence is a step towards final emptiness, which is beyond language and thought. For this second group, the emptiness is best characterized as freedom from elaborations. Freedom from the four extremes of existence, nonexistence, both, and neither.

For example, Gorampa is famous for having critiqued Tsongkhapa's view of emptiness saying it has fallen into the extreme of nihilism because Tsongkhapa has stopped short and only avoids the first extreme, the extreme of existence. [Gorampa says that] his [Tsongkhapa's] interpretation of emptiness is that of the absence of intrinsic existence which means he has not rejected the extreme of nonexistence. Therefore, he has fallen into the extreme of nihilism. In this view, the final emptiness really must transcend all these four extremes—(1) existence, (2)

nonexistence, (3) both [existence and nonexistence], and (4) neither [existence nor nonexistence].

One of the things we have to keep in mind here is that sometimes people tend to contrast the two camps, Tsongkhapa and Gorampa, as one emphasizing nonimplicative negation and the other characterizing emptiness as freedom from elaboration. This is not a really helpful way to contrast them because even Tsongkhapa would characterize his understanding of emptiness as beyond all conceptual elaboration. Tsongkhapa's emptiness, absence of intrinsic existence, would be characterized as freedom from conceptual elaboration, freedom from the four extremes.

Therefore, the more helpful way of contrasting the two is to say the second camp suggests that emptiness is beyond the simple absence of intrinsic existence. It is a form of absence that transcends all four extremes, and it is a step beyond the emptiness of intrinsic existence. That's one helpful way of seeing the difference.

In any case, both of these camps do agree that in the context of emptiness, in the logic of emptiness, there is an important negation going on because the word empty itself suggests something being negated. Here, when we think of "being empty of" the Laṅkāvatārasūtra actually provides a whole string of different kinds of "being empty of" and most importantly it contrasts two types of emptiness. One is an extrinsic emptiness and one is an intrinsic emptiness.

The intrinsic emptiness really deals with the very nature and identity of the thing in question. For example, things and events as being empty of intrinsic or inherent existence would be a form of intrinsic emptiness. Then the extrinsic emptiness refers to, for example, a temple being temporarily devoid of monks because there are no monks in the temple. In the later case, *what is empty of* and *the thing that is empty* are two separate things. What is being emptied is extraneous to the thing that is empty. The Laṅkāvatārasūtra says that second kind of emptiness is trivial whereas the right kind of emptiness is the former, where the negation must pertain to the thing itself. The nature and identity and reality of the thing itself.

Here it is important to know, whether or not how one understands the Tibetan debate on intrinsic emptiness versus extrinsic, the rangtong / shentong debate, at least in the Laṅkāvatārasūtra, there is a form of extrinsic emptiness which is rejected as being trivial. The intrinsic emptiness is emphasized because the emptiness that we are talking about must relate to the nature and identity of the thing in question because it is in the way in which we misconceive the nature of reality of the things themselves which leads us to perpetuate in the cycle of existence. The emptiness which is the remedy against that must involve addressing that very question of how we view things themselves. Therefore, intrinsic emptiness is really emphasized in the Laṅkāvatārasūtra.

When it comes to the Indian textual sources for the characterization of emptiness as a form of negation, particularly a nonimplicative form of negation, the evidence is just far too many to

cite here. It is just extensive. If you look at Nagarjuna, Buddhapalita, Aryadeva, Chandrakirti, Bhāvaviveka, all the great Indian Madhyamaka masters, their writings are replete with language and phraseology that really approach emptiness purely from the negativa approach as well as characterizing emptiness in terms of simple negation of inherent existence. That is extensive, so let me just give a few samples here just to give a taste. First is from the Seventy Verses on Emptiness by Nagarjuna:

> *Since all things are empty of intrinsic existence,*
> *the peerless Tathagata has clearly taught*
> *this truth of dependent origination*
> *with respect to all things.*
>
> *This [alone] exhausts the ultimate truth;*
> *the conventions posited for the sake of the world,*
> *the fully awakened Blessed One labeled*
> *all these varied facts as 'truths' [as well].*
>
> *Nāgārjuna - Seventy Verses on Emptiness, 68-69*

In commenting on this, in Nagarjuna's own autocommentary on the two lines of this text, he writes:

> *The ultimate reality is simply the fact that*
> *all dependently originated things are devoid*
> *of intrinsic existence.*
>
> *Nāgārjuna - Seventy Verses on Emptiness, Autocommentary, 68-69*

Nagarjuna is very clear. He says ultimate reality is *simply the fact* that all dependently originated things are devoid of intrinsic existence. This equation of absence of intrinsic existence with the ultimate nature of reality is very very explicit in Nagarjuna's writing.

Let me quote Buddhapalita. I read:

> *To see this fact that things lack essential existence*
> *is to see suchness, and this is the middle way;*
> *this is established to be the ultimate truth.*
>
> *Buddhapalita - Commentary on the Root Verses on The Middle Way*

He says that what it entails to see the emptiness of phenomena, what it entails to see the ultimate reality of phenomena or suchness, he says to see the fact that things lack essential existence is to see their suchness, tattva.

Here in Buddhapalita's quotation, he equates three things: (1) tattva, which is suchness, (2) middle way, madhyama marga, and (3) ultimate truth, paramartha satya. Buddhapalita equates these three and the knowledge of them is, he says, to see this fact that things lack essential existence.

Let me quote from Chandrakirti. He writes:

> *Here what is referred to as 'self' is that intrinsic nature—namely, the nature of things conceived of as not dependent upon others—and the absence of this is selflessness. Because of the twofold distinction of persons and phenomena, this selflessness is understood in terms of two kinds—the selflessness of phenomena and the selflessness of persons.*
>
> *Chandrakirti - Entering the Middle Way,*

He is equating self with intrinsic existence and selflessness with the emptiness of intrinsic existence. You can see that Nagarjuna, Buddhapalita, Chandrakirti, they are very clear in understanding what emptiness means and what selflessness means. It is a simple negation of intrinsic existence.

Elsewhere, Chandrakirti defines no-self or selflessness in terms of emptiness of intrinsic existence and uses the phrase *selflessness defined in terms of the absence of intrinsic existence* and then says that there is no second door to liberation other than the knowledge of this

> *That alone is the unmatched door*
> *to enter the town of nirvana.*
>
> *Chandrakirti - Entering the Middle Way*

The textual evidence in the great Indian Madhyamaka writers on Tsongkhapa's insistence on characterizing emptiness in terms of a nonimplicative negation is really extensive. Of course, if one adopts a standpoint where you say that the ultimate reality is best characterized in affirmative language following the emphasis of Maitreya's writing, then it's a different kind of position. But if you take Nagarjuna and his immediate disciples like Aryadeva as well as his commentators, Bhaviveka and Chandrakirti and Buddhapalita as authorities on the Madhyamaka theory of emptiness, then Tsongkhapa's suggestion that we read emptiness in *via negativa* terms and as nonimplicative negation, the textual evidence is just too strong to deny this fact.

Two Objections to Tsongkhapa's View

Now let's look at Tsongkhapa's characterization of emptiness in terms of nonimplicative negation. We know from history and the textual evidence that this has been a major object of criticism from Tibetan thinkers like Gorampa and others. I'm not going to go into the details of the polemics here but let me identify two very important objections.

The first one is the one I already alluded to earlier, that absence of intrinsic existence is only a step towards full and final understanding of emptiness, which must take the form of freedom from the four extremes of existence, nonexistence, both, and neither. This is one important objection powerfully raised in Gorampa's critique of Tsongkhapa.

The second on is that absence of intrinsic existence, because it is a form of negation, falls into the purview of language and thought and the mahayana scriptures have been very explicit in stating that ultimate truth transcends language and thought. Even if we accept the Madhyamaka writings on emptiness as presenting emptiness of intrinsic existence as constituting the ultimate reality, even then, it is best described as figurative or expressible ultimate truth, not the actual and inexpressible ultimate truth. The distinction is drawn between figurative vs actual, or expressible vs inexpressible ultimate truth. This comes up in some Svatantrika Madhyamaka writers like Jnanagarbha and Shantarakshita, this distinction between expressible vs inexpressible, figurative vs actual ultimate truth comes up.

The second criticism is that even if we accept absence of intrinsic existence as a kind of ultimate truth, it's only a figurative one, an expressible one, not the final actual inexpressible one. The final inexpressible emptiness is best described as freedom from the four extremes of existence, nonexistence, both, and neither.

These two objections are critical.

First Objection: Emptiness defined as absence of intrinsic existence is incomplete

The first objection, from Tsongkhapa's point of view, the response to this is that the first objection seems to read the negation of the four extremes as being on a single linear process. Rejecting one after another in a linear process, in a kind of logical reasoning. Here, to my knowledge, there are no Indian sources that present us a way of reading that way. Somehow offering a form of logical reasoning where existence, nonexistence, both, and neither are part of an overall logical reasoning that points to emptiness. There isn't anything like that.

Also, these people who criticize Tsongkhapa for this seem to suggest that the logic that is involved in Madhyamaka dialectic is not a classical traditional logic. In a traditional logic, when you negate *A*, the negation of *A* is equal to *non-A* because there is the law of the excluded middle and the law of contradiction applies. These people who are scholars, thinkers who are critiquing Tsongkhapa seem to suggest that a different kind of logic is being used here where it is not a traditional classical logic where when you reject *A*, that does not imply *non-A*.

This is a highly controversial suggestion to make because there is nothing in the Indian textual evidence to suggest that great masters like Nagarjuna, Chandrakirti, and Aryadeva, all of who were great logicians, were using a different kind of logic. Modern scholars generally tend to agree that there is nothing in the Indian Madhyamaka sources that suggests acceptance and use of some kind of non-classical logic. I think it's important to make that point.

Furthermore, if you look at the actual logical structure of the statements where the rejection of all four is presented, existence, nonexistence, both, and neither, they seem to point towards conceptual or logical possibilities. They don't seem to be a part of a logical reasoning to establish emptiness for a person, but they seem to be pointing towards possible logical and conceptual possibilities that one might adhere to when dealing with the nature of reality.

For example, when you reject intrinsic existence, there are two possibilities that could emerge for the person. (1) Since intrinsic existence is not tenable for things, then that means things do not exist at all. So, when you negate intrinsic existence you could either go to the nihilistic route, and reject existence at all, or, you could go the route where somehow you reify the negation of intrinsic existence and propose that somehow the absence of intrinsic existence is the ultimate truth. It's like you reify emptiness.

For the first case, you point towards the conventional existence. The nonexistence is rejected by pointing to the conventional truth. For the second route, if you reify emptiness, then there is the teaching on the emptiness of emptiness. Emptiness of emptiness is remedy against the potential danger of reifying emptiness. If you look at the logical structure of the Indian texts which uses this formula of the four extremes, they seem to be pointing towards conceptual possibilities that might emerge.

Similarly, once you reject existence and nonexistence, there is the possibility that somehow reality is beyond language. Somehow reality is beyond the categories of existence and nonexistence—it is both. Historically, Jain traditions have maintained a dual character to reality and things. For example, arising from self as well as arising from other, existence and nonexistence. That's another possibility, so that needs to be rejected.

Then when you reject that, then there is the possibility of thinking that somehow things go beyond existence and nonexistence, it is neither of them. There is that conceptual possibility. So, the Indian Madhyamaka texts, when they use the formula of the four extremes, they seem to be ruling out all conceptual possibilities rather than using them in a linear way to establish pointing towards emptiness. I think this is an important point to remember.

Tsongkhapa also says that when, in a logical context, using the reasoning to establish emptiness, when you have negated intrinsic existence in a comprehensive manner, it leaves no room, no space for any potential reification. Even the emptiness of emptiness, the reifying of emptiness is only a conceptual possibility. But for a yogin who realizes emptiness, that establishment of emptiness of emptiness comes almost automatically as a byproduct. Because when you have negated comprehensively any possibility of intrinsic existence, there will be no room left for reification of anything. This is an important point that Tsongkhapa makes.

He says one of the tests of veracity of your understanding of emptiness is to see, in the light of that understanding, are there any tendencies on your part to reify any other thing. Tsongkhapa says this is a good test because if your understanding has reached to the bottom… When

Tsongkhapa talks about rejection of inherent existence, he is talking on a very comprehensive level, not just any specific intrinsic existence, he is talking about negation of intrinsic existence in any possibility, comprehensively. When that happens, there will be no room left for reification. Realization of emptiness of emptiness then comes as a byproduct.

This is brought up very explicitly in Gyaltsab's commentary on the Ratnagotravibhaga, Uttaratantra, Sublime Continuum. He says:

> *If one has realized subtle emptiness, while that wisdom remains active, there will be no basis left for grasping on to the negation itself as being somehow real.*
>
> *Gyaltsab Je – Commentary on Uttaratantra*

In other words, he is saying that once one has realized emptiness, realization of emptiness as empty will come as a byproduct, naturally.

Second Objection: Nonimplicative Negation is only Nominal Ultimate Truth not Actual

As to the second objection, that emptiness as absence of intrinsic existence is at best a figurative ultimate truth, not an actual one, this objection points towards something very important in the very heart of the Madhyamaka thought. It's a kind of a paradox. On the one hand, all Madhyamaka masters including Tsongkhapa agree that the ultimate truth transcends language and thought. But at the same time, they also agree that it is only via language and thought that beginners have access to the ultimate truth. So, there's a kind of a paradox there. This whole debate on figurative vs actual and inexpressible vs expressible emptiness is really towards that paradox.

To be brief, Tsongkhapa is saying that this distinction between the two should not be understood as suggesting that somehow there are two kinds of ultimate truth. Here, lets remember that Nagarjuna was very clear that ultimate truth is something that has no multiple separate meanings. He said ultimate truth is only one meaning, it's single taste.

So, Tsongkhapa is really pointing towards that important point. He is saying that even Madhyamaka masters who do distinguish expressible vs inexpressible and figurative vs actual ultimate truth, they are not talking about two kinds of ultimate truth in an objective sense. They are talking about the realization of that truth from two kinds of perspectives. (1) The inferential cognition of beginners for whom the only access to ultimate truth is through language and thought, through concepts. (2) The perspective of the yogins who realize emptiness directly.

Tsongkhapa is saying that in the first context, the beginners who realize emptiness primarily through concept, their understanding of emptiness can be characterized as expressible at least in negative terms because this is something they have access to through language and thought. Whereas yogin's direct experience of emptiness goes beyond language even in terms of

negation. He says that the distinction between expressible and inexpressible ultimate truth should not be seen as referring to two kinds of ultimate truth out there, but rather as two different perspectives on the knowledge of emptiness. I think this is an important point.

Furthermore, when Tsongkhapa says that inferential cognition of emptiness should be understood as knowledge of emptiness, he's not saying that the object of that inferential cognition, whether the appearing object or the apprehended object should be understood as emptiness. What he is saying is that the real understanding of emptiness, understanding of the absence of inherent existence through inference should be recognized, understood, accepted as the realization of emptiness through concept. That's the only way in which we can understand emptiness through concept. Because it relates to emptiness purely in negative terms, there is no affirmation, we can legitimately characterize that as having realized emptiness.

I think it's really important to appreciate the nuance that is being brought in. Furthermore, Tsongkhapa is saying that people who criticize the nonimplicative negation as a attribute of emptiness are misunderstanding what kind of negation is entailed here. Quite often people have the archetypical simple model of the absence of a pot on this table as an example of a nonimplicative negation. In that kind of context, what is being empty of is a concrete phenomenon whose absence we recognize in front of us. That simple model of nonimplicative negation should not be used as understanding the nonimplicative negation that is involved in understanding emptiness.

In understanding emptiness, what is being negated is all possible formulations of intrinsic existence. It's not just a negation of something positive that is it out there and pointing to the simple absence of it. It is pointing to the absence of all possible metaphysical postulations that are premised on intrinsic existence. So, it is a much more comprehensive and it is called nonimplicative negation because of the character of the negation, there is no implication, no affirmation in the aftermath. The negation is pure and simple, but what is being negated is quite comprehensive. I think that's another important point we need to keep in mind.

Furthermore, from Tsongkhapa's point of view, one would ask even those who insist on talking about freedom from the four extremes, isn't the word freedom the same as negation? What more is being brought here? Freedom, telwa (W: bral ba), is the same as absence and we use it even in conventional language often as equivalent: freedom from such and such / devoid of such and such. That's another important point that Tsongkhapa would raise.

Also, Tsongkhapa would ask when those who argue that emptiness or ultimate truth is best characterized as freedom from four extremes, what is this freedom from four extremes referring to? Are they referring to the things themselves such as pots and pans being free from the four extremes of existence, nonexistence, both, and neither. Or are these absence of four extremes understood as attributes of emptiness?

If it is the first, then it really doesn't make much sense to speak of pots and pans as being free of extremes of existence and nonexistence. But if you look at the Indian Madhyamaka sources, generally the freedom from four extremes are seen as attributes of the ultimate truth, not of the things themselves. Then, what does it mean to say that emptiness is beyond existence, nonexistence, both, and neither? I think here one thing that is quite clear, at least in my reading of Madhyamaka texts as well as Yogachara sources because Yogachara also uses the language of neither existence, nonexistence, both, or neither as well. In my reading of the Indian sources, what seems to be pointed out here is the emphasis on developing a view of ultimate reality that is not stuck in any of the extremes of existence, nonexistence, both, or neither. It is really talking about the quality of the view of reality and they are really seen as attributes of the ultimate truth itself, not of things.

For example, in Bhaviveka's Essence of the Middle Way, Madhyamaka-hṛdaya, there is a passage which uses this formula. He selects emptiness as the basis of the discussion saying emptiness is beyond existence because it cannot be captured by existential cognitions like perception of pots and so on. In other words, it cannot be understood in terms of any affirmation. He says emptiness is beyond nonexistence because it cannot be understood by thoughts to relate to nonexistent things like horns of a rabbit. Emptiness is not both existence and nonexistence because these are two completely contradictory attributes that cannot coexist in one phenomenon. Finally, emptiness is neither existence nor nonexistence because beyond these two characteristics, there's nothing else we can say about reality.

So, in Bhāvaviveka's reading it is really seen as referring to emptiness itself. The same thing with Vasubandhu, so I think this is an important point to keep in mind. Here, talking about some people's preference for the language of freedom from conceptual elaboration versus negation of conceptual elaboration, Tsongkhapa writes the following in his Ocean of Reasoning, his commentary on Nagarjuna's Treatise on the Middle Way. I quote:

> *Some are very happy to hear that the aryas, through the wisdom of meditative equipoise, realize freedom from fabrication (conceptual elaboration), but are very unhappy when they hear the arya realizes external negation (nonimplicative negation) free from fabrication. The reason is that without understanding the meaning of external negation (nonimplicative negation), which is the mere elimination of the object of negation, they erroneously believe that all external negations (nonimplicative negations) imply complete nonexistence as in the case of the horns of the rabbit. But if nothing existed, it would be contradictory to say that there are nonimplicative negations.*
>
> *Tsongkhapa - Ocean of Reasoning*
> *p 496 section 1.2.1.1.1.2.1.2.2.3 Classifications of ultimate truth*
> *Translation by Jay Garfield (glosses by Thubten Jinpa during oral teaching)*

Tsongkhapa is pointing out here that when push comes to shove, nonimplicative negation of intrinsic existence and freedom from conceptual elaborations really come to the same point. He

says but some people don't like the language of nonimplicative negation. They prefer, they are happier when the language of *freedom* is used. I think this is important to keep in mind.

Evidence for presenting Emptiness as a Negation is Extensive

In any case, as I said earlier, the evidence in the Indian Madhyamaka sources for the characterization of ultimate truth and emptiness as a simple negation, a nonimplicative negation, is really extensive.

Here, also, we need to keep in mind that if you look at the synonyms of emptiness used in the Indian sources: (1) absence of inherent existence (W: rang bzhin med pa, T: རང་བཞིན་མེད་པ་, S: niḥsvabhāvatva) absence of intrinsic existence; (2) no locus (W: ngas med pa, T: གནས་མེད་པ་, S: anāspadam) which is no basis or no locus; (3) absence; (4) no object (W: dmigs su med pa, T: དམིགས་སུ་མེད་པ་, S: can't find) (5) rootless.

If you look at all of these terms which are often used as synonyms for emptiness, they all point to simple negation. In fact In Nagarjuna's Commentary on the Awakening Mind, Bodhicittavivāraṇa, he speaks of space as the best analogy or metaphor for emptiness to the point where he says yogins of emptiness are sometimes referred to as a space yogin. Here I read from Nagarjuna's text:

> *The abiding of a mind which has no object*
> *is defined as the characteristic of space;*
> *[so] they accept that meditation on emptiness*
> *is [in fact] a meditation on space.*
>
> *Nāgārjuna – Commentary on the Awakening Mind, 51*

Space is nothing but the absence of any obstructive quality. There is also a sutra statement where it says that other than space, there is no other better metaphor for emptiness. Of course in Madhyamaka sources and elsewhere, there are slightly more affirmative languages used as synonyms for emptiness. We already touched on some of them. One is "thatness" or tathātā, another is suchness or tattva, or ultimate reality dharmatā.

Even in these cases, which we find used more extensively in Nagarjuna's Collection of Hymns, if you dig deeper, there is no content beyond negation. If you say "thatness," there is no affirmative content there. If you say "suchness," it's a simple very delimiting language. It's kind of pure negation.

I think this is really important to keep in mind because if you look at the evolution of Buddhist teaching, say from the point of view of the three turnings of the wheel, in the first turning of the wheel, Buddha emphasized the teaching on impermanence and no-self. Then in the second turning of the wheel, that no-self teaching culminates in the teaching on emptiness because in

the first turning the no-self is confined primarily to personal existence of the individual person and examining in terms of relation of the aggregates. “This is not me, this is not self, and so on.” But in the second turning in the Prajnaparamita Sutra, Perfection of Wisdom Sutra, the concept of emptiness or selflessness is comprehensive and embraces both person and phenomena. In this way, we can see if we stay close to the language of negation, a via negativa approach, then we will see how the second turning teaching on emptiness can be seen as the culmination of the Buddha’s teaching in the first sermon. That, I think, is really important.

Furthermore, one of the things that we have to remember is the reason why great Madhyamaka masters like Nagarjuna, Chandrakirti, Aryadeva, Bhaviveka, Buddhapalita, as well as Tsongkhapa are so insistent on sticking close to the language of negation is really the understanding that the moment you slide towards any kind of positive affirmative language, the human tendency would be to immediately grasp, reify.

That’s one of the reasons why in the history of Indian Buddhist thought, for example, Yogacharas have been criticized for their concept of alaya-vijnana, foundational consciousness, as bringing atman from the back door, so there is insistence on the negation approach.

Essentially what the teaching on emptiness involves is progressive layers of peeling off that grasping, that reification, that we have constructed on reality, one by one, and carefully, systematically, methodically, so that in the wake of such deconstruction, we don’t add anything again. Therefore, someone like Tsongkhapa is really careful about the language of negation in the context of emptiness, so we don’t give ourselves any prop to hold onto to get stuck on yet another reification.

That’s why if we take Nagarjuna and Chandrakirti and Aryadeva’s writings seriously as the highest authority on emptiness, then Tsongkhapa’s insistence on defining emptiness purely in terms of negation—not only negation but nonimplicative negation, simple, categorical, comprehensive negation of all possible reification and intrinsic existence—it is really important to appreciate that significance.

Conclusion and Key Points

To conclude, philosophically, emptiness represents the silencing of all metaphysical views that are premised on or presuppose the notion of objective intrinsic existence. Logically and epistemologically, emptiness entails categorical negation in the form of a simple negation without leaving anything to be affirmed in its aftermath. Psychological, emptiness brings about the cessation of all forms of grasping and the felt need to seek some kind of grounding. Ethically speaking, given that emptiness means dependent origination, especially in terms of complex interdependence, it really offers the sound foundation to ground our norms of ethics, what is to be abandoned and what is to be adopted. Also, doing that without the need to seek some kind of objective grounding for these norms.

I think this is why getting emptiness right is really crucial, not just for the view, but across the spectrum for us, philosophically, psychologically, ethically, and soteriologically as well. As Aryadeva puts it, there is no second door to liberation other than emptiness.

Let's remember the key points of this class.

1. Both Perfection of Wisdom scriptures as well as the Indian Madhyamaka treatises present emptiness in terms of negation of intrinsic existence.
2. In the definition of ultimate truth which can be seen as the definition of emptiness as well, all the five attributes are in the form of negation.
3. In Tibet, historically, there evolved two distinctive approaches to understanding what the final meaning of emptiness is. Is it best characterized through via negativa approach or a more affirmative approach. How these two correlate to the interpretation of prioritizing with Nagarjuna's collection of texts or Maitreya's collection of texts. Coincidentally, these two camps also fall into the rangtong intrinsic emptiness and shentong extrinsic emptiness camp as well. Tsongkhapa defines emptiness in purely negative terms and understands it to be nonimplicative negation, a categorical absolute negation of intrinsic existence. A comprehensive negation.
4. According to Tsongkhapa, the differentiation between expressible and inexpressible or the figurative or actual ultimate truth should not be understood as referring to two distinct types or kinds of ultimate truth but rather about emptiness as realized by inferential cognition through concept versus direct realization by arya's gnosis

Thank you.

Verses for Meditation Practice

Opening: settling the mind practice

Hymn to the Perfection of Wisdom:
Ineffable, inconceivable, and inexpressible is the perfection of wisdom;
not arisen, unceasing, it has the nature of empty space;
it's the object of gnosis that knows reality through reflexive awareness—
I pay homage to the mother of the conquerors of three times.

So what exactly is this truth that represents the ultimate nature of reality?

Analogy of the snake in relation to a coiled rope

གཞན་ལས་ཤེས་མིན་ཞི་བ་དང་། །སྤྲོས་པ་རྣམས་ཀྱིས་མ་སྤྲོས་པ།།
རྣམ་རྟོག་མེད་དོན་ཐ་དད་མེད། །དེ་ནི་དེ་ཉིད་མཚན་ཉིད་དོ།།

Not to be attained by means of another,
free, not fabricated through conceptual elaboration,
devoid of conceptualization, not having separate meanings—
this is the nature of reality.
—MMK, 18.9

བརྗོད་པར་བྱ་བ་སྤྲོས་པ་སྐྱེ། །ཤེསམས་ཀྱི་སྤྱོད་ཡུལ་བརྗོག་པས་སོ།།
མ་སྐྱེས་པ་དང་མ་འགགས་པས། །ཆོས་ཉིད་མྱ་ངན་འདས་དང་མཚུངས།།

What is to be spoken of has ceased,
for the domain of consciousness has ceased.
The nature of things is to be, like nirvana,
without arising and cessation.
–MMK, 18.7

4 – Identifying the Object of Negation

10/14/2022

Welcome to class 4 of Tsongkhapa's Madhyamaka. In this class, we'll be focusing on a very important aspect of Tsongkhapa's Madhyamaka thought which is the doctrine of identifying the object of negation. We learned in the last three classes how, according to Nagarjuna, Chandrakirti, and Āryadeva as read through Tsongkhapa, emptiness really has to be understood primarily in the terms of negation; that also as a nonimplicative negation that is simple, absolute, comprehensive, and categorical negation of intrinsic existence.

In order to really convey to you the sense of the importance that Tsongkhapa assigns to this task of identifying the object of negation in his understanding of emptiness and his explanation on emptiness, I would like to cite two sections of his texts. (1) From his first major work on Madhyamaka which is the insight section on Lamrin Chenmo, the Great Treatise on the Stages of the path. (2) From his second major work on Madhyamaka, Essence of Eloquence, which is the hermeneutic text. The first quotation:

> *In order to be sure that a certain person is not present, you must know the absent person. Likewise, in order to be certain of the meaning of 'selflessness' or 'the lack of intrinsic existence,' you must carefully identify the self, or intrinsic nature, that does not exist. For, if you do not have a clear concept of the object to be negated, you will also not have accurate knowledge of its negation. For* Shantideva's Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds [9.139] *says:*
>
> > *Without contacting the entity that is imputed*
> > *You will not apprehend the absence of that entity.*
>
> *There is limitless diversity among objects of negation, but they come together at the root; when you refute this, you refute all objects of negation. Moreover, if you leave some remainder, failing to refute the deepest and most subtle core of the object of negation, then you will fall to an extreme of true existence. You will cling to the idea of real things, whereby you will not be able to escape cyclic existence. If you fail to limit the object of negation and overextend your refutation, then you will lose confidence in the causal progressions of dependent-arising, thereby falling to a nihilistic extreme. This nihilistic view will lead you to rebirth in a miserable realm. Therefore, it is crucial to identify the object of negation carefully, for if it is not identified, you will certainly develop either a nihilistic view or an eternalistic view.*
>
> *Je Tsongkhapa - Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path, Vol 3, p126*

This is a long section that I cited from Tsongkhapa's insight section in Lamrim Chenmo where he really emphasized the need for identifying what exactly is being negated. Citing Shantideva, he says that if you don't identify what is being imputed, then you cannot understand its absence, which is the absence of that imputation.

Furthermore, he says when it comes to identifying the object of negation, there are limitless reifications that take place. What matters most is to get to the bottom, the root, and really refute that which is the most fundamental. Here, let's remember in one of the earlier classes I talked about how what is most important is to get to the root, the innate assumption of intrinsic existence, which really underpins all the other layers of superimposition and reification. Tsongkhapa is making that point, that one's identification of the object of negation must get to that level of depth and bottom.

Additionally, he says that when you actually refute it, you need to tread a fine line between over-negation which will lead you to nihilism because you then reject the conventional reality of things, or under-negation where you leave certain traces of real existence untouched. He is emphasizing the need for this very balanced fine line to be adopted. If you don't do this, chances are that you will fall into either of the two extremes. This is an important emphasis from his Lamrim Chenmo.

The Object Negated must be Personally Experienced

Let me now read the second quote from his Essence of Eloquence:

> *Here, without having a clear awareness of the way in which one apprehends things as true existence and so on or having a good idea of the object of negation—namely, that which is apprehended—if one relies simply on impressive sounding phrases like "things cannot exist in such terms," even though one might say such things as "there are such and such problems if things were to exist in such terms," and, "here are the arguments to prove that things do not*[5] *exist in such terms," one still hasn't understood well the point. Therefore, identification of the object of negation is extremely important.*
>
> *Je Tsongkhapa – The Essence of Eloquence*

What Tsongkhapa is saying here is that your identification of the object of negation has to be quite fundamental and comprehensive and also it really has to hit the mark with respect to your own perception of the worldview because otherwise you may use impressive sounding words that things do not exist in such and such a way and if they did there would be such and such problems and so on, but you will not really hit the mark.

Not only is Tsongkhapa saying that we need to have conceptual clarity, but that identification of the object of the negation needs to be something that you can emotionally relate to, something that touches upon your own existence. So, there's an existential side to it.

[5] Note here that in the actual video lecture, this citation is presented on the screen and has an error at this point displaying: "here are the arguments to prove that things do exist such terms." Thubten Jinpa reads it correctly in his lecture.

The key point to remember here is that first of all, it is important to have conceptual understanding of what is being negated. Secondly, that object of negation needs to be something very profound and comprehensive and deep. Thirdly, it needs to be something that touches you, that hits you. It should not be simply an intellectual exercise about things that are out there. It really needs to relate to one's own existence. It has to have an existential experiential quality. Then, the negation itself needs to tread the fine line between over-negation and under-negation. I think that's really an important point.

I said earlier that the first Madhyamaka text in which Tsongkhapa outlines this doctrine of identifying the object of negation is in his insight section in the *Lamrim Chenmo*, *The Great Treatise*. If you look at that whole section, one can identify key elements of that overall project of identifying the object of negation. This is important to recognize. One [key element] is the need for conceptual distinction between existence on the one hand and intrinsic existence on the other so that one's negation of intrinsic existence does not necessarily lead to negation of existence per se.

Here Tsongkhapa takes great pains to really demonstrate the difference. I showed that how for many realists, including Buddhist realists, whenever they hear of Nagarjuna's critique of intrinsic existence, they hear him rejecting existence itself. So Tsongkhapa is pointing out that in identifying the object of negation, it is very important to conceptually distinguish between existence and intrinsic existence.

At the same time, there is a kind of paradox. Tsongkhapa himself says that this differentiation between existence and inherent existence ultimately can only be made when one has realized emptiness. If that is the case, then why is he insisting on making such distinction as part of the overall strategy of identifying the object of negation? The point that Tsongkhapa is making is that to the extent that it is possible conceptually, one needs to make that distinction. Experientially, that distinction will only come later in the aftermath of having realized emptiness. I think that is an important point.

Two Realities, Two Domains of Discourse, Two Types of Analysis

The second point, remember, is that this whole project of identifying the object of negation also emphasizes the need to distinguish between two domains of discourse: (1) conventional domains of discourse and, (2) ultimate domains of discourse, and their corresponding two forms of analysis, (1) analysis pertaining to conventional level of truths and (2) ultimate analysis. Tsongkhapa is really clear on the importance of these two levels of analysis and the importance of making sure that you don't apply ultimate forms of analysis onto conventional level of truth.

In some sense, to use contemporary philosophical language, to do so is to commit a category mistake. Just because when you use the ultimate analysis, we cannot find a person, whether in relation to the body or mind or many of the aggregates, therefore if you then conclude and say, "Person therefore does not exist," then you are using an ultimate analysis to negate something

that is actually conventionally true. So, the application of ultimate analysis to conventional truth is something that is rejected, that is discouraged by not just Tsongkhapa, but also Chandrakirti and Nagarjuna and others as well. These are two different domains of discourse and they pertain to two distinct natures of reality, (1) conventional level of reality and (2) ultimate level of reality, and corresponding to these two levels of reality, there are also corresponding forms of analysis.[6]

So, distinguishing between these two forms of analysis and their domains is a really crucial [key point] because Tsongkhapa says in his insight section on Lamrim Chenmo that many of the potential nihilistic views that have been espoused in early interpretations of emptiness in Tibet were partly a result of conflating these two forms of analysis and by using ultimate analysis because one cannot find anything, therefore one rejects the reality of conventional truths. He says that it is really important to be able to be very clear on what level of analysis we are engaging in and what is the domain of analysis that it relates to.

Here, let me cite again two sections from Tsongkhapa's texts, first from *Lamrim Chenmo*, his insight section, to really illustrate what he means by these distinct forms of analysis:

> *A proper analysis of whether these phenomena—forms and so on—exist, or are produced, in an objective sense is what we call 'a line of reasoning that analyzes reality,' or 'a line of reasoning that analyzes the final status of being.' Since we Mādhyamikas do not assert that the production of forms and such can withstand analysis by such reasoning, our position avoids the fallacy that there are truly existent things. … To ask whether something can withstand rational analysis is to ask whether it is found by a line of reasoning that analyzes reality. Candrakīrti's* Commentary on the Four Hundred Stanzas *says: '… because our analysis is intent upon seeking intrinsic natures.'*
>
> *Je Tsongkhapa - Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path, Vol 3, p156*[7]

Here, Tsongkhapa is really saying that when we analyze for example, productions and so on, from the point of view of ultimate final status of things, then we're using ultimate analysis in relation to conventional truth. These conventional truths cannot withstand ultimate analysis and just because they cannot withstand ultimate analysis does not mean somehow the ultimate analyses have negated them. This is an important point.

Similarly, let me read from Tsongkhapa's Illuminating the Intent, his commentary on Chandrakirti's Entering the Middle Way. I quote:

> *In the Prāsaṅgika system, if one is unsatisfied with conventional designations, and in relation to statements such as "the sprout arises," one analyzes what exactly is the*

[6] While not stated explicitly, the form of analysis corresponding to ultimate truth are the Five Great Madhyamaka Reasonings. The form of analysis corresponding to conventional truth is the Pramana system of Dharmakirti.
[7] The video lecture incorrectly lists the page reference here as 126. I have corrected it in the transcript.

referent of that phrase — does the sprout arise from itself, from another, and so on. From that point on, the analysis becomes an inquiry into suchness. This is entirely different from everyday inquiries based on worldly conventions, such as "Where have you come from?" "Where are you going?" "Where is it, outside or inside?"

Je Tsongkhapa – Illuminating the Intent, p267

Tsongkhapa is really saying that the moment you go beyond the boundary of everyday reality, everyday conventions and then start digging deeper into what exactly is the ultimate referents of these terms like causes and effects, and so on, "Are they outside? Are they inside? Did they come from themselves?" you are entering the territory of ultimate analysis whereas conventional analysis and conventional discourse stays within the boundary and framework for everyday conversation and convention. I think these two citations give you Tsongkhapa's emphasis of being very clear on what is the domain of discourse here and what is the appropriate analysis that needs to be applied here.

There is quite a nice story in Buddhapalita's commentary on Nagarjuna's *Treatise on the Middle Way* in chapter 18 [Critique of Self and Phenomena] where Buddhapalita tells the story of two villagers disputing about the identity of a figure on a temple mural. It's a mural with an image holding a trident and one says, "This is Vishnu," the other says, "No, this is Shiva." The first says, "The one who is holding a trident is Shiva, one who holds a wheel is Vishnu." So they are disputing and then a renunciate comes by and they ask the renunciate to adjudicate who is right. The monk says, "Yes, the one who is holding the trident is Shiva."

Buddhapalita goes on to say that the monk actually knows it is neither Shiva nor Vishnu, it's just a painting, but while knowing this, he says it is Shiva and when he says that, he is not committing a lie because the context in which the conversation is taking place is within this everyday convention and the fact that it is a painting is a presupposition on the part of both parties in the dispute, so for the renunciate to say, "This is indeed Shiva," is not committing a lie, he is telling the truth.

In the same way, Buddhapalita says that the fully enlightened Buddha, while he knows that nothing possesses intrinsic objective existence and nothing is true in an ultimate sense, Buddha still makes distinctions between what is conventionally true and what is conventionally false.

The point being made by Buddhapalita's analogy is that if the monk were to have said, "Neither of you are right because this is a painting. This is neither Shiva nor Vishnu." He would be committing a category mistake because he would be going beyond the boundary of the actual discourse. This is really quite a powerful example of what it means to observe the boundary of the discourse, whether it is conventional or ultimate and the appropriate language and analysis that goes with it.

In any case, this distinction between what constitutes an ultimate analysis and what constitutes a conventional analysis is a really important one because Tsongkhapa feels that many of the

misreadings of Madhyamaka reasoning, particularly by the realists, including Buddhist realists who accuse Nagarjuna of falling into nihilism, are really misreading Nagarjuna's ultimate analysis as applying to conventional truths. Ultimate analysis does not apply to conventional truth. Ultimate analysis does not negate conventional truth. For Tsongkhapa, this is a very important logical principle that needs to be appreciated as part of inquiry into emptiness.

Non-Finding is not the same as Negation

The third point to remember is the distinction between what is negated by reason, a specific type of reasoning, and what is not found through such analysis. Not finding is not the same as negating it or refuting it. This, I think, is an important one, and this actually is probably based on Dharmakirti's epistemological tradition where different forms of inference based on nonobservations are identified and in some specific contexts, nonobservation can lead to inference of absence.

For example, if there is an elephant in this room, then it should be observable and the fact that we cannot observe an elephant in this room is proof enough to establish the elephant's nonexistence in this room. So here, nonobservance and nonexistence coincide. But in some contexts, nonobservance and nonexistence need not coincide. So Tsongkhapa is making the point that just because a particular fact has not been discovered through a certain type of reasoning does not mean that reasoning has negated it. The distinction between not having found and negating is an important one.

Tsongkhapa gives quite a memorable example. He says that no matter how fine one's eyes are, they will never see sound. The visual faculties are meant for forms, not for sound. The fact that the eyes do not see sound does not negate the reality of sound. I think that's a memorable example to keep in mind. In other words, the point is that just because something cannot be observed, something hasn't been observed or found, should not be equivalent to saying that something has been negated or refuted through that reasoning or analysis. That's an important principle.

Then, the fourth principle as part of identifying the object of negation is the need to differentiate between two forms of negation, which we already talked about before. The implicative negation which implies something in the aftermath of negation and nonimplicative negation which is a simple categorical negation that does not imply anything in the aftermath. That's one of the reasons why in Tsongkhapa's many Madhyamaka texts, there is a separate section on the differences between the two forms of negation with examples given. So this is an important point.

Four Possible Issues that could cause Straying into Nihilism

Through all of this, what Tsongkhapa is trying to do is to really take seriously the potential for nihilism that is there if we misunderstand the teaching on emptiness and the way in which one

can prevent falling into nihilism is to make these important distinctions and so that one does not make these category mistakes and also appreciate the subtlety of the negation that is entailed in the logic of emptiness. In Lamrim Chenmo particularly, the insight section of The Great Treatise, Tsongkhapa really strives hard to demonstrate that Madhyamaka philosophy of emptiness, view of reality, cannot in any form be characterized as nihilistic. And he wants to really explain this quite thoroughly so he goes through four possible sources in Madhyamaka teachings that could be seen as potentially pointing towards nihilism.

1. Whether or not things can withstand ultimate analysis.

This is something that we covered earlier. Just because pots and pans and causes and effects cannot be found when subject to ultimate analysis does not mean that they are negated. This is an important point so he goes quite deeply into this.

2. Whether or not the existence of phenomena can be established by valid cognitions, the pramana, reliable cognitions.

This is a more controversial point because many Madhyamaka interpreters in Tibet would insist that Chandrakirti does not accept valid cognitions within the Prasangika system. Tsongkhapa rejects this. Tsongkhapa argues that within the limited framework and domain of conventional truth, Chandrakirti does accept valid cognitions, pramana. That's an important analysis that Tsongkhapa makes because if you don't accept valid cognitions, then on what grounds can you distinguish between the veridicality or veridical nature of perception of water as water and mirage as water. There needs to be something that would help us, some kind of criteria by which we can differentiate one is valid and the other is invalid.

In any case, we're not going to go into the details of debate, but Tsongkhapa insists that even according to Chandrakirti, let alone Nagarjuna, the concept of valid cognitions has to be embraced, at least within the scope of conventional truth.

3. The Madhyamaka dialectic that rejects arising from all four possibilities: arising from self, another, both, and no cause.

This is a typical diamond sliver argument that is presented in Nagarjuna's *Treatise on the Middle Way* and Chandrakirti's *Entering to the Middle Way*. Does this unique Madhyamaka dialectic of rejecting arising from all these four possibilities indicate Madhyamaka rejects arising in the first place? That's another important potential source for misunderstanding Madhyamaka as being nihilistic

4. The rejection of all four extremes: existence, nonexistence, both, and neither

Finally, Tsongkhapa looks at the use of the rejection of all four extremes that we discussed in the last class. How does one develop a coherent reading of the textual passages that seem to suggest that Madhyamaka is rejecting all these four possibilities? Tsongkhapa goes through all

four in quite a detailed way in *Lamrim Chenmo*, the insight section, so that he comes up with a coherent reading that demonstrates that nothing in the Madhyamaka thought justifies accusing Madhyamikas of being nihilistic, having rejected reality of conventional truth.

The Psychology of Identifying the Object of Negation

Now I've talked about some of the logical principles that are part of this overall project of identifying the object of negation. We also talked about the epistemological principles and philosophical. But from a practitioner's point of view, I think the most important aspect of the doctrine of identifying the object of negation is a psychological one.

What Tsongkhapa is asking us is to really enter into a profound and sustained self-inquiry of looking deeply into the very way in which we view ourselves. How does the thought "I am" arise? When the thought "I am" arises, how does it appear? What does it look like to our mind? How do we emotionally relate to it, to that sense of selfhood?

In the end, the power and importance of the doctrine of identifying the object of negation really is more psychological. It is asking us to have a deep insight into the basic psychology of who we are as embodied beings with a sense of self because even though we feel the reality of our self-existence or the reality of our self viscerally, unquestionably, but at the moment we reflect and try to see what that self is, we immediately recognize its ephemeral nature. We can't see it, it's sort of fluctuating. What Tsongkhapa is asking is for us to settle our mind and look deeply and find a way to identify what that perception of self looks like. How does it arise?

Therefore, from a practitioner's point of view, the practice of identifying the object of negation is essentially a sustained, self-critical inquiry which asks us to not only view how we see ourselves but also how we relate and view the world around us. He is asking us to go through a sustained process of uncovering layers and layers of constructions that were built upon our perceptions of ourselves and the world. That, I think, is in the end, the most important aspect of this doctrine of identifying the object of negation.

Then what exactly is the criteria, the measure of having identified that object of negation. Here, let me cite from Tsongkhapa himself in his *Illuminating the Intent*:

> *Understood thus, an existence through its own objective mode of being and not posited in dependence on being perceived by cognitions or posited by virtue of the power of cognitions constitutes true, ultimate, and final existence. And grasping at this is the innate grasping at true existence.*
>
> *Je Tsongkhapa – Illuminating the Intent, p175*

In other words, while the world that we construct is entirely dependent on how we conceive it, but our assumption about the world is somehow the world is independent of our perception. The world somehow exists in its own right through its own essential nature and intrinsic nature

and that assumption, the object of that assumption is what is to be negated here. The grasping at that is the innate grasping. That's an important sentence in Tsongkhapa's writing which really gives us the criteria of what it means to grasp at that object of negation.

Also, earlier, in one of the classes, I referred to Aryadeva's point about how it is the seeing through conceptualization that chains us and that is what is being negated here. So this conceptualization, conceptual elaboration is the language that is being used to refer to that innate grasping.

Let me give another quotation from Tsongkhapa's Illuminating the Intent where he lists six synonyms for this object of negation. This is important and I quote here:

> *Grasping at things as existent as described above—not posited by the power of conventions such as name alone—constitutes innate grasping at things as (1) "true," (2) "ultimate," or (3) "absolute existence," (4) "existence by virtue of an essential nature," (5) "existence through intrinsic characteristic," or (6) "intrinsic existence." And the object grasped at by such a mind is, hypothetically speaking, the measure of true existence.*
>
> *Je Tsongkhapa – Illuminating the Intent, p185*

He identifies six synonyms: true existence, ultimate existence, absolute existence, existence through essential nature, existence through intrinsic characteristic, intrinsic existence. These, he sees as synonyms and he says the object grasped at by such a mind is, hypothetically speaking, the measure of true existence.

These are important. These are six synonyms that are often used and often in the Madhyamaka writings they are used interchangeably. Sometimes one talks about negation of true existence, sometimes one talks about negation of ultimate existence, intrinsic existence, and so on.

What we have done so far is to first appreciate the importance of identifying the object of negation and then we looked briefly at what are the key elements of that overall project of identifying the object of negation, the logical principles, the need for differentiations of domain of discourse and forms of analysis, the epistemological distinction between the forms of negation involved, differentiation between not finding and being refuted or negated and finally, we identified the most important dimension which is really the psychological one primarily from the practitioner's point of view.

Four Key Points for Practice

Then the question is, having appreciated the importance of this and having understood the various aspects of this, how do we go about bringing these insights into actual practice from a practitioner's point of view? Here, Tsongkhapa teaches that in cultivating the view—which is deepening our understanding of emptiness—the first step is really identifying the object of

negation. Then, the full steps he explained in the *Lamrim Chenmo*, the insight section in *The Great Treatise*, in terms of what are called the four key points.

Four Key Points

1. Identifying the object of negation
2. Ascertaining the Pervasion – if things exist in an inherent, intrinsic way, then they should exist intrinsically either as one or multiple. In relation to self, if self exists in an intrinsic way, it should be either identical with the aggregates or it should be separate from the aggregates
3. Ascertaining the absence of identity
4. Ascertaining the absence of difference

Those are the four key points and the four steps that are involved but the first [most important] one really is identifying the object of negation.

Perception versus Apprehension

I said earlier that from a practitioner's point of view, the most important aspect of identifying the object of negation is a form of self-inquiry. You take up your own perception of self and examine deeply as to how the thought of "I am" arises and how does the sense of self appear like. Here, Tsongkhapa differentiates between a perceptual level and the apprehension level or cognitive level in our sense of self.

The perceptual level is how self appears to us. The apprehension level is how we conceive that self. His advice is that to the extent it is possible, a large part of our effort really needs to be spent on the first one, trying to get a sense of how self appears to us. It is easier said than done even though we use our language of self so effortlessly.

We think in terms of self and others, I and others effortlessly, but if we try to identify what that self or I is, it becomes very difficult because sometimes the self or I seems to exist within the mind and body complex. When I say, "I feel sick," I identify with a particular state of body. "I'm hurt," when your hand is injured, "I'm hurt," you are now identifying with your body. "I'm depressed," you are identifying with your state of mind. Quite often, somehow the self seems to get fused in our complex of body and mind.

But sometimes the self seems to have kind of an autonomy of its own because we have the idea that somehow, over and above our body and mind, there is a kind of master whose body and mind it is. If you look deeply into the way in which the sense of self appears, it is a complex one.

So, Tsongkhapa really is asking us, as a first step in our inquiry into emptiness, we really need to sit down and reflect deeply to get a sense of how the sense of self, how the self appears to our sense of self. Once we have been able to get a better sense of how self appears to us, then the

conception of self, we will get a better appreciation of that. The challenging part is really about getting a handle on the appearance of self to our mind.

I think we will discuss a bit more about this progression into the four points later in the final class when we discuss more specifically the practice aspect of cultivating the view of emptiness.

In one of the texts related to the Gelug, Tsongkhapa's cultivating the view, I wrote something which I think I could read here:

> *Once we have identified the self as perceived by our innate sense of "I am" and have examined its existence in terms of whether such a self is identical or distinct from the aggregates, we then need to sustain the force of our ascertainment that no such self exists in reality. At that point, three factors come to converge. (1) We have recognized the mode of perception of an innate sense of self, (2) we have identified its mode of apprehension, and (3) we have gained ascertainment that there is no such self at all.*
>
> *Here, the important thing is that we ensure that in our meditation, our mind rests single-pointedly on the pure absence in the form of a categorical negation, "The self as perceived and conceived just does not exist," as if the contemplating mind itself has assumed a form of this absence. Stressing this point about meditating on emptiness as if the mind is fused with it, Tsongkhapa on other occasions writes:*
>
> > *If you meditate on emptiness as something external, it would lead to a contemplation of something truly existing; therefore, meditate by fusing it inseparably with your mind.*[8]

In the end, this doctrine of identifying the object of negation is not really about a theoretical exercise. In the end, why it matters most is because it is a psychological self-inquiry where each one of us is being asked to look deeply into how a sense of self arises and for all of us unenlightened beings, a sense of self arises naturally based on this assumption of intrinsic existence.

In fact, Tsongkhapa says in one of his texts, I think in *Illuminating the Intent*, he says: For sentient beings, except during meditative equipoise on emptiness of the arya beings, there are no occasions during which sentient beings' minds are not infected by the deluded perception of intrinsic existence.

In other words, at the perceptual level, except when your mind is completely equipoised in direct realization of emptiness in arya's meditative state, even for arya beings, the perception of intrinsic existence always remains. It only comes to be removed at the level of buddhahood. I think here, the important distinction is the perceptual versus the apprehension level. We can have definitely valid conventional cognitions which might be deluded at the perceptual level

[8] My formatting and punctuation of this reading is speculative since it was not displayed onscreen.

because it still assumes intrinsic existence, but the apprehension level can still be referred to as valid knowledge. So, I think it is important that Tsongkhapa is asking us to really take home the advice on identifying the object of negation and relating that to the earlier discussion about getting to the bottom and identifying the innate assumption. Not the layers of superficial level, other layers of reification, but getting to the bottom, to the innate level.

Let me summarize the key points of this class.

- One of the key points Tsongkhapa makes is the importance of making the conceptual distinction between existence and intrinsic existence, although experientially, that distinction will come only in the aftermath of realizing emptiness, but conceptually and intellectually it is important to make the distinction.

- The importance of differentiating between two forms of analysis, a conventional level of analysis that pertains to conventional truth and ultimate level of analysis that pertains to the actual reality of things in an ultimate sense.

- How identification of the object of negation is, in the final analysis, a form of critical self-inquiry carefully examining our own mind, how it naively assumes intrinsic existence and super-imposes upon objects that it perceives intrinsic existence.

These are the key points of this class.

Thank you.

Verses for Meditation Practice

Lesson Four: Identifying the Object of Negation

Opening: settling the mind practice

Guided practice of identifying the conceived “I”

Simply observe the mind, reflecting on the present experience of sitting down and meditating:

Who is this meditating “I”? Where is it? How does it appear to your mind?

Focus on the appearance dimension—how does this sense of self arise? How is this the sense of self is felt?

“I” am sitting on a cushion
“I” am meditating
Where is this “I”? In the body, in the mind, or elsewhere?

I am neither identical with the aggregates nor distinct from them;
the aggregates are not in me nor is I in them;
I do not exist as possessing the aggregates.
What, then, is this “I”?
—MMK, 22.1(modified)

ཕུང་མིན་ཕུང་ཡོ་ལས་གཞན་མིན། །དེ་ལ་ཕུང་མེད་དེར་དེ་མེད།།
དེ་བཞིན་གཅེགས་པ་ཕུང་ལྡན་མིན། །དེ་བཞིན་གཅེགས་པ་གང་ཞིག་ཡིན།།

What is seen through conceptualization is that binds us;
and this is what is being negated here.
–CS

What is seen, heard, and perceived,
these are not what is being negated here.
It is the notion of true existence,
which the source of suffering, that is negated here.
–BCA, 9.25

5 – What Remains in the Wake of Emptiness: Conventional Existence

10/21/2022

Welcome to lesson five. This class is focused on the question of what remains in the wake of the negation of emptiness. In other words, what is the status of conventional existence that is not supposed to be negated in the context of Madhyamaka's emptiness.

In the previous class we talked about Tsongkhapa's doctrine of identifying the object of negation and his insistence on finding that fine line that would avoid sliding into the extreme of existence or nonexistence. In one of the earlier classes, when we talked about what exactly is emptiness, we also talked about how at the heart of the doctrine of emptiness is a process of negation that is entailed. So, negation is at the forefront of understanding the nature of emptiness.

The question remains what exactly is left. If you look at texts like Nagarjuna's *Mulamadhyamaka-karika*, *Treatise on the Middle Way*, the negation is quite comprehensive. The scope of negation is actually quite vast, from the simplest things to the categories that are dear to Buddhism such as the Four Noble Truths, the Three Jewels, and so on, as well as causes and effects, the three factors of action such as the agent, act, and object of action. Even attributes of conditioned phenomena like arising, cessation, and so on. All of these are comprehensively subject to critique in Nagarjuna's text. Things themselves are also critiqued as possessing any kind of objective existence.

If you look at the Madhyamaka texts, particularly of Nagarjuna, one gets the impression that there is really nothing left, even nothing sacred from the Buddhist tradition left as something that one can postulate as having true existence. The question is: What exactly is left in the wake of this comprehensive negation when presenting the theory of emptiness?

The Difficulty of Articulating Conventional Truth

Tsongkhapa says that understanding and being able to articulate what is left remaining in the aftermath of negation of emptiness is perhaps the hardest thing to understand in relation to Madhyamaka philosophy of emptiness. Let me cite a passage from the insight section on his Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment. Remember, this was the first major treatise that he wrote on the Madhyamaka philosophy of emptiness.

> *How to posit things on the conventional level when objective intrinsic existence is refuted. Yet, if one fails to posit such conventional existence in a correct way, it would not be possible to gain conviction in the veracity of the method aspects of the path thus could lead to a nihilistic view.*

Therefore, those with discerning mind should learn to be adept in positing conventional reality according to this Prasangika system.

Je Tsongkhapa - Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path, p183[9]

Elsewhere in the same text, Tsongkhapa actually puts this challenge of being able to posit a robust reality to things and phenomena in the aftermath of the negation of emptiness in a poetic way. He writes it in the form of verse. Here again, I read from *Lamrim Chenmo*, the insight section.

O friends learned in the Madhyamaka treatises,
it will be hard indeed to your mind to posit causality
and dependent arising in the absence of intrinsic existence;
hailing that this is indeed the Madhyamaka view,
it would be elegant to rely on those who propound such a view.

Je Tsongkhapa - Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path, p325

He is essentially admitting that conceptually and intellectually, it is indeed hard to have a coherent understanding of how to posit a robust reality to the conventional truth once you have negated any degree of objective intrinsic existence. Yet he says that if you are committed to following the Madhyamaka standpoint and embracing it, then you have no choice but to find a way to make peace with it. It's almost as if he's suggesting a large part of that developing of understanding of conventional reality in the wake of Madhyamaka's teaching on emptiness is in addition to making intellectual and conceptual sense, is also making an emotional adjustment to that truth. Finding a way, almost at the visceral level, to be able to be at ease with that kind of view on reality which does not seek any grounding, do you remember? Earlier I referred to some of the synonyms of emptiness such as no locus, no ground, no object.

So, the suggestion here is that the challenge for the Madhyamika, someone who takes the teaching on emptiness seriously, is to find a way to have a robust notion of reality in the wake of the negation of emptiness where there would no longer be any urge to seek the grounding of reality in something objective out there.

Now those who wish to go deeper into the specifics and details and arguments and challenges of how to understand conventional reality in the Madhyamaka context, particularly in Madhyamaka Prasangika, such as according to Tsongkhapa's view, I would recommend that you read *Moon Shadows*, a collection of papers on conventional reality in Prasangika Madhyamaka view and particularly the contributions from Jay Garfield, Sonam Thakchöe, and Tom Tillemans which touch upon Tsongkhapa's views particularly. I would recommend you to read those contributions in that collection because these scholars delve deeply into all the aspects of the

[9] The page numbers given for these citations of Lamrim Chenmo in the class video seem to refer to a different edition. All of my page numbers refer to the Snow Lion publication copyright 2002.

challenges that are a part of developing a coherent view of conventional reality within a view that rejects intrinsic objective existence even on the conventional level. That is the position of Madhyamaka Prasangika as Tsongkhapa explains.

Madhyamaka does not Reject Relative Reality

The fact that the Madhyamaka doctrine of emptiness does not negate reality as a whole is something that even Nagarjuna explicitly states. Let us recall in one of the earlier classes, I talked about how in response to potential criticism of Nagarjuna's view, alleging his position to be leading toward nihilism, recall Nagarjuna said those objections are coming from a place where they misunderstood three things:

> *Here we say that you do not understand*
> *the purpose of [the teaching of] emptiness,*
> *emptiness itself, and the meaning of emptiness;*
> *in this way you are thus frustrated.*
>
> *Nāgārjuna - Root Verses on The Middle Way, 24:7*

(1) The purpose of the teaching of emptiness, (2) what exactly is emptiness, (3) the meaning of the word emptiness. In responding to that criticism, Nagarjuna does not admit that he is actually denying the reality of phenomena. He basically says that the criticism is coming from a misplaced understanding of the doctrine of emptiness.

Similarly, in Chandrakirti's writings, it is even more explicit, the fact that the Madhyamaka theory of emptiness does not reject conventional truth. For example, Chandrakirti explains that in the wake of negating any objective grounding of phenomena, one needs to understand the existence of phenomena purely in terms of dependent origination based on the Buddha's teachings of "this coming from that."

Here, the key phrase Chandrakirti brings out forcefully is *mere conditioned-ness*, kyen nyi di pa tsam (T: རྐྱེན་ཉིད་འདི་པ་ཙམ་, W: rkyen nyid 'di pa tsam, Sanskrit: <not sure> idam pratyaya). In [the phrase] *mere conditioned-ness*, this word *mere* is really supposed to refer the famous phrase from Buddha's teachings such as in the Sutra on Dependent Origination and the Rice Seedling Sutra, where Buddha, in explaining dependent origination of phenomena says, "This arises and this exists, that will exist. This arises, that arises. Conditioned by ignorance, volition arises." This coming from that—this phrase *mere conditioned-ness* is supposed to refer to these kinds of statements from the Buddha.

When we talk about what remains in the wake of emptiness, it is important to distinguish logically between two things. (1) the question of what remains in the wake of the negation of emptiness. (2) what is implied by the word emptiness. Those are two different things. In this class we are really talking about the first one, what is left standing in the aftermath of the

negation from emptiness logic. As to the second question, what does the word emptiness imply? Given that emptiness is understood in terms of nonimplicative simple negation, the answer has to be nothing. The word emptiness does not imply anything. If it implies something, then the form of negation becomes implicative. The distinction between these two is an important one.

Let me follow up again on this important point that the negation in the context of emptiness does not really negate conventional reality. Here let me cite another passage from Chandrakirti, this time from his commentary on the *400 Stanzas on the Middle Way*, Aryadeva's text. I read:

> *Given that you would be rejecting eyes and so on, how is that [through your analysis] you have actually not negated these things? Because our analysis pertains [only] to the search for the intrinsic nature of things. Here, we negate things as existing through their own essence; we do not negate the eyes and so forth themselves, which are dependently originated and effects of karma. Since such things do exist, things such as eyes which are referred to as effects do have existence.*
>
> *Chandrakirti – Commentary on Four Hundred Verses*

Chandrakirti is really explicit in saying that what is being negated is the assumption of eyes and so forth as existing through some kind of essence, in their own right, with intrinsic nature. The eyes and so forth themselves which are effects are karma are not what are being negated here.

Tsongkhapa's Threefold Criteria for Conventional Existence

Then the question is, what exactly is that conventional existence that is supposed to remain standing in the aftermath of negation? Here, Tsongkhapa comes up with a very helpful threefold criteria of conventional existence. This is something that Tsongkhapa is famous for, presenting criteria for conventional existence in Madhyamaka philosophy.

1. A given fact through or acknowledged within a conventional cognition
2. That it is not invalidated by another valid conventional knowledge
3. It is not invalidated by analysis probing into the ultimate nature of reality

There are three things. One is that it is something that is perceived, that is an object of cognition. It's perceived, it is known to conventional cognition. For example, horn of a rabbit would not meet this criterion because horn of a rabbit is a pure fiction and it's an impossible fiction. There is no cognition that can perceive horn of a rabbit. This first criteria is essential.

Just because some thing meets the first criterion does not qualify that thing as conventionally real because, for example, a mirage is a phenomenon that has been perceived, but a mirage perceived as water can be invalidated by the perception of mirage as mirage. Therefore, the second criterion becomes important. Just because it is perceived by a cognition is not sufficient.

Not only that but also, what is perceived or cognized should not be invalidated by another valid cognition. So, a mirage being perceived as water is of course invalidated by the cognition that perceives the mirage as a mirage. That is easy to understand. For example, the perception of a mirage as water is sometimes a function of being far away. Then, as you get closer, then the fact that what was seen is a mirage becomes obvious.

Again, these two criteria are not adequate. There might be certain postulations such as, for example, a worldly person assumes things and objects to be independently existing out there independent of our perception. That perception cannot be invalidated by another conventional knowledge because all conventional knowledge presupposes that kind of objective existence. However, the assumption of objective intrinsic existence will be and can be invalidated by an inquiry probing into the ultimate nature of reality.

Similarly, the third criteria is also important for being able to refute philosophical postulations such as atman, eternal self. Eternal self can be refuted by applying ultimate analysis.

So, Tsongkhapa comes up with this threefold criteria of what constitutes conventional existence. One thing that you have to note here is that if you look at each of these three criteria, none of them are objectively grounded. All of them are subjective. The fact that it should be known or perceived by a conventional cognition, that it should not be invalidated by another conventional knowledge, and it should not be invalidated by inquiry probing into the ultimate nature of reality. All of these are really are from the subjective perspective.

Intersubjectivity

I think here one thing that is really important to differentiate is that what Madhyamaka Prasangikas like Chandrakirti and Tsongkhapa are rejecting is really an objective grounding of phenomena. Anything that is conceived to have some kind of existence in its own right, independent of the perceptions of sentient beings is understood to be untenable. But objective truth, or objective existence is not the same as denial of intersubjectivity.

Intersubjectivity refers to beings of the same realm or same category being able to see things in a common way. For example, I see this computer and you see this computer, and we share a common object. So, there is an intersubjectivity to this phenomenon in front of us. Tsongkhapa and Chandrakirti are not denying that. They're not saying each one of us is living in solipsistic solitary world where the only world that we see is what we see and nobody else sees that. They're not pointing to that kind of world view, but what they are rejecting is any kind of objective grounding to the conventional reality.

I think it is really important to look at this and I think this suggestion of a threefold criteria of conventional existence that Tsongkhapa has proposed is a major contribution to having a more current understanding of what people like Chandrakirti and others are trying to point at.

Furthermore, one thing that we have to remember is that even in the Buddha's scripture, which Chandrakirti and Tsongkhapa both cite in their writings, there is a statement where the Buddha says, "I do not dispute with the world. What the world says exists, I say exists. What the world says does not exist, I do not say exists." With respect to the status of existence of conventional reality, Buddha is saying that we need to really accept within the framework of worldly convention.

I think on this point of the negation of emptiness not rejecting conventional reality is really a consensus across the major sutras and the great Madhyamaka thinkers including Tsongkhapa. That is an important point.

The Meaning of "Convention"

You will notice that one of the important points in all of this is the reference to the world "conventional." Conventional cognition, conventional truth, conventional existence—the word convention is a translation of [the Sanskrit] saṃvṛti and [the Tibetan] kündzob (T: ཀུན་རྫོབ་,W: kun rdzob) we will discuss more deeply, especially Chandrakirti's explanation of three different meanings of the word *convention* in the next class on the two truths. The point here is to really try to get some kind of grip on what exactly is meant by the word *convention*.

Here, Tsongkhapa says that certain words are used interchangeably. Conventional cognition, or what is sometimes referred to as the unexamined perspective, unanalyzed perspective, or worldly convention. These are interchangeable. When we say the existence of phenomena can only be established from the perspective of unexamined or unanalyzing cognition. The word *analyzing* and *unanalyzing* refers to probing into the ultimate nature of reality.

Conventional truths are posited within the framework that does not go beyond a certain boundary of language, thought, convention, and so on. In talking about what this word *conventional cognition* means, let me quote from Tsongkhapa's *Lamrim Chenmo* again, the insight section in the *Great Treatise*:

> *Conventional cognitions are cognitions that operate without analysis, such as those that engage their objects only within the context of how a given phenomenon appears to it, without analyzing in terms such as, "Is this how the thing actually exists, or does it just appear this way to my mind?" These are called unanalyzed perspectives, but it is not the case that they do not engage in any form of inquiry. Given that they operate within the context of how things appear and are known to a worldly or conventional knowledge, they also constitute what is meant by worldly convention. And this kind of cognition occurs in everyone, whether or not their minds have been exposed to philosophical systems. Thus, no matter whose mindstream they occur in, they are called worldly conventions or unanalyzed perspectives.*
>
> *Je Tsongkhapa - Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path Vol 3, p178*

What Tsongkhapa is saying is that actually by worldly convention or unanalyzed perspectives, one is referring to our shared intuitions about everyday epistemic practice. One should not confine these worldly conventions only within the minds of uneducated people who are not exposed to philosophy or Madhyamaka. Tsongkhapa is saying that this unanalyzed, unanalyzing perspective or worldly convention exists in all, in every sentient being because they relate to the natural intuitions about our epistemic practice. That is really important.

Part of that is the suggestion that worldly conventions or truth should only be posited within a limited framework that does not go beyond a certain level of analysis. Remember earlier, one of the most important things that Tsongkhapa insists we keep in mind is the distinction between the two domains of discourse that are correlated with two forms of analysis: conventional level of analysis and ultimate level of analysis. Conventional truth has to be understood within a framework that does not go beyond a certain boundary. If you move beyond a certain boundary, you delve into the domain of ultimate analysis.

Three Aspects of Conventional Reality

One of the key phrases that Madhyamaka thinkers used is what is called *satisfaction with no analysis*.[10] Satisfaction with no analysis is the idea that if you are serious about relating to things without grasping onto them, without seeking some kind of objective existence out there, you need to find a way to be content with the conventional level of reality. You need to find satisfaction without feeling the urge to look for, for example, what is the true referent behind the term *self*? The moment you seek some kind of true reference for the terms, then you are really looking for objective grounding. Satisfaction with no analysis is a key phrase that the Madhyamaka masters use to convey their idea about what level of existence or truth that they are actually accepting.

The second characteristic of conventional truth that they talk about is dependent origination. Things should be understood purely in terms of dependent origination. This arises from that. That's the second attribute.

The third attribute is that conventional truth, especially conditioned phenomena, are endowed with causal efficacy. They have causal capabilities. Cause and effect.

These three attributes are used by Madhyamaka writers whenever they talk about conventional level of truth / reality. Of these three attributes, the important one is really this phrase *satisfaction with no analysis*.

[10] Mattia Salvini, in the text *Madhyamaka and Yogacara* offers a different perspective on this term: "Incidentally, the expression avicāraramaṇīyatā found in Indian Madhyamaka texts doesn't quite mean 'satisfaction with no analysis,' but rather, 'being satisfactory as long as not analyzed.' The expression refers to a quality of conventional dharmas rather than to an inner contentment on the part of the Madhyamaka adept."

How can there be a Robust Relative Truth without Intrinsic Existence?

One of the characteristics of Tsongkhapa's Madhyamaka philosophy is his commitment to really seeking clarity in the implications of Prasangika's rejection of intrinsic existence even on the conventional level. Once you reject intrinsic existence on the conventional level, what does that mean for having a robust and coherent understanding of the actual level of reality that one is supposed to espouse?

Tsongkhapa's striving for clarity is what led to his proposal of the threefold criteria of conventional existence and also his insistence that Madhyamaka Prasangika does not reject knowledge as a whole, conventional knowledge or valid cognition. In fact, Madhyamaka Prasangikas notion of conventional reality should be robust enough to allow us to differentiate between mirage as a mirage, mirage as water, and water as water. One must have some means by which one can differentiate between what is true and false within the context of conventional truth.

The [need of having] a criteria by which we can differentiate between the truth and falsity of something like mirage as water and water as water requires that even Prasangikas accept the role for valid cognitions like inference, direct perceptions, and so on.

This insistence on phenomena being established by valid cognitions is something that has been another object of critique by subsequent Tibetan Madhyamaka thinkers, most famously Taktsang Lotsawa, who really critiqued Tsongkhapa on this point. Because of Tsongkhapa's insistence on phenomena being established by valid cognition, Taktsang accused Tsongkhapa of bringing in the back door realist assumptions from Dharmakirti and Dignaga's philosophy and mixing this in an inappropriate way in Madhyamaka Prasangika philosophy.

Of course, Tsongkhapa was not alive when these objections were raised, so he did not respond, but one important response would be to say that this objection is coming from a place where there is a conflation taking place between two things. Things being established by valid cognition is not the same as suggesting that things on the conventional level of reality possess some kind of ability to stand existentially on their own. Tsuk tup tu drup pa (T: ཚུགས་ཐུབ་ཏུ་གྲུབ་པ་, W: tshugs thub tu grub pa) is the thing's ability to stand on their own existentially and tsé mé drup pa (T: ཚད་མས་གྲུབ་པ་, W: tshad mas grub pa) is things being established by valid cognition.

Things being established by valid cognition really has to do with the valid cognition's ability to differentiate between what is true and what is false. It's a subjective point from the subjective experience of the person whereas things' ability to stand on their own existentially is really an objective fact. Tsongkhapa would reject the later and would say it's not the same as the former.

In any case, one of the characteristics of Tsongkhapa's Madhyamaka philosophy is his constant striving towards clarity and refinement in understanding not just emptiness but also the implications of that emptiness such as in understanding the status of the conventional truth.

In the end, Tsongkhapa does admit that having a completely coherent conceptual understanding and ability to articulate in words the status of the conventional existence is really challenging. He says that in some sense, one has to embrace the conventional existence and nominal existence almost as if there is no choice. It is something that one has to come to through a process of elimination. Here I will read two passages, one from Tsongkhapa's Ocean of Reasoning, his commentary on Nagarjuna's Treatise on the Middle Way. The other is from his Essence of Eloquence, his hermeneutic text. It gives you a sense of the struggle. It's a very refined line of thinking and reasoning.

> *[Existence through its own characteristic and existence that is not merely in virtue of being nominally posited are the same.] The mode of positing through the force of convention—as when it is said, "all conventionally existent phenomena are posited through the force of convention"—is as follows: Consider a conventional assertion, such as, "I accumulated this karma and I am experiencing the effect." If we search for the way in which the basis of this conventional positing exists, we find that it is neither the eyes, nose, etc., individually; nor is it them taken collectively; nor is this "I" any other thing. This is the sense in which the person does not exist inherently. Nonetheless, if we cannot say such things as "I see," this would be inconsistent with conventional authoritative cognition; so it must be the case that we can. <Now comes the important sentence.> Since objective existence [of things] in the sense of existing through their own nature turns out to be untenable, they are established as existing through the force of convention.*[11]
>
> *Je Tsongkhapa - Ocean of Reasoning p38*

Tsongkhapa is really considering what the phrase "all conventionally existent phenomena are posited through the force of convention" means. He says that since things existing through their own nature is so problematic and turns out to be untenable, we have no choice but to admit that things existing through the force of convention comes to be established.

In The Essence of Eloquence he writes the same point in a slightly different way:

> *When of the two, objective existence and conventional existence, objective existence in the sense of existing through one's <own> nature is found to be untenable, then, without choice, existing through the force of convention comes to be established.*
>
> *Je Tsongkhapa - The Essence of Eloquence p372*

[11] This excerpt is the same as in Jay Garfield's published book, Ocean of Reasoning, except for the last sentence, which in the book reads: Since objects do not exist through their own nature, they are established as existing through the force of convention.

In other words, he says when we look at the word existence and when we think of the concept of existence, there are only two viable options. One is to admit objective existence. The other is to accept nominal existence, existence in a conventional sense. Since the objective existence, which would entail assuming some kind of ability for things to exist in their own right by virtue of some kind of essence, is totally untenable in the light of Madhyamaka reasoning, then the only alternative left is to say that if things do exist, the only way we can make sense of their existence is the conventional level of existence. That, I think, is a powerful point.
In a way I would say that these statements suggest that Tsongkhapa really admits that in the end, the existence of things on the conventional level cannot be fully articulated in a satisfactory manner in words. At some point we have to somehow accept that conventional existence in the sense that that's the only viable alternative left standing, because objective existence is totally untenable.

Given the challenging nature and difficulty of really articulating what that status of existence is, we find attempts in the Madhyamaka texts, including that of Tsongkhapa in characterizing what is the nature of that existence, what is the flavor of that existence, if I can use that word. We find words like dependent origination—that is classic terminology in Nagarjuna's texts and Chandrakirti's and others. Then earlier I cited the word of dependent origination of mere conditioned-ness, this coming from that. So there's a very limited sense, this word mere conditioned-ness, kyen nyi di pa tsam (T: རྐྱེན་ཉིད་འདི་པ་ཙམ་,Wyl: rkyen nyid 'di pa tsam). Then of course, the classical terms conventional existence, ta nyé du yö pa (T: ཐ་སྙད་དུ་ཡོད་པ་, W: tha snyad du yod pa). Then words like mere conventions, mere terms, mere expressions, ming tsam (T: མིང་ཙམ་), tak tsam (T: རྟགས་ཙམ་ W: rtags tsam). This word *mere* keeps popping up.

Nagarjuna's Relative Reality – Illusion-like dependent designations

In Nagarjuna's writing he talks about mutual dependence, pen tsün tö drup (T: ཕན་ཚུན་ལྟོས་གྲུབ་, W: phan tshun ltos grub) or dependent designations. So dependent origination, there is the concept of dependent designation. There's one famous stanza in Nagarjuna's *Mulamadhyamaka-karika* where he says:

> *Whatever is dependently originated, this was declared to be empty.*
> *That I call dependent designation and this is the true middle way. [24.18]*

In that stanza, Nagarjuna equates dependent origination, emptiness, dependent designation, and middle way. Dependent designation is another way of talking about dependent origination, this time from a conceptual perspective.

In all of this, there is the exclusionary word *mere* (W: tsam). When you say mere expressions, mere terms, mere nominal existence, what does the word mere exclude? Here, Tsongkhapa is very clear in saying that one's understanding should get to the point where what the word *mere* excludes is only the objective existence.

Mere words, mere expressions, mere terms, mere designations does not mean that the only things that exist are the words and the names. What is being negated and excluded is the objective existence. Tsongkhapa is saying that Nagarjuna and Madhyamaka Prasangikas are not proposing that what is left there standing are just words. That is not the correct way of understanding. The word *mere* excludes objective existence. Here, let me quote from Tsongkhapa's Essence of Eloquence on this point about the word mere:

> *The meaning of the phrase "mere terms" should be understood in terms explained earlier, namely in the sense of not being findable when searched for any objective reference; it should not be understood to mean that somehow terms exist and not their referents, or that there is nothing other than linguistic terms.*
>
> *Je Tsongkhapa – The Essence of Eloquence*

These are really really fine distinctions. It's almost impossible to perceive what kind of distinctions are being made, but they are really important because remember earlier Tsongkhapa talks about how getting emptiness right involves finding and treading the fine line between the two extremes of existence and nonexistence. That's also one of the reasons why his emphasis on identifying the object of negation earlier [was so strong], so that you don't slide into nihilism or eternalism. Part of that also involves understanding phrases like *mere terms* and *mere designations*. What does the word *mere* mean? The key phrase here is *not being findable when searched for any objective reference*. This unfindability when searched for reference.

This is a really important point in Tsongkhapa's Madhyamaka writings. He says that except for the Prasangika, almost all the other Buddhist philosophical schools, they do not resist, in the end, the urge to find some kind of true referents for the terms, including Bhaviveka, who is a Madhyamaka philosopher and the founder of Svatantrika Madhyamaka. This we will discuss later in one of the classes when we talk about the distinctions between Svatantrika and Prasangika. Tsongkhapa accuses Bhaviveka of accepting some kind of residue of realism because Bhaviveka has not fully resisted the temptation to seek true referents behind terms.

This, I think, is a key phrase, not findable when searched for any objective reference. This is really important.

What I've tried to underline here is the challenge of how to understand the status of that conventional existence that is left standing in the aftermath of the negation of emptiness and how Madhyamaka masters in the past have attempted to articulate that. What we are seeing here is according such a minimal, limited level of existential status to phenomena, but even that has to be robust enough to be able to differentiate between what is true and false in a conventional context. Attempts to use words like mere conditioned-ness, dependent designation, mere terms, and so on, all of these are the attempt to seek that very fine line that would allow us to not slide into either of the two extremes.

As Nagarjuna is the founder of Madhyamaka philosophy, Tsongkhapa, Chandrakirti and all the other great Madhyamaka masters see their task as, in some sense, expounding what Nagarjuna himself has discovered and revealed. Unfortunately, we don't have access to any extensive prose written by Nagarjuna at least in the Tibetan translation world and also existing Sanskrit manuscripts. So, a lot of the time, we have to rely on interpreters like Chandrakirti when trying to understand what Nagarjuna's position or approach would be such as on this challenging question of how do we accord existential status to conventional truth.

In my reading I would say Nagarjuna's attempt to articulate what is left standing seems to involve two approaches. (1) to emphasize the idea of mutual dependence. This is an important point in Nagarjuna's writings that is sometimes missed by commentators—that one of the attempts that Nagarjuna is making is to remind us that there is no such thing as ultimately primitive reality, something that is indivisible, irreducible, building blocks of reality. Everything that we can conceive and think of is ultimately contingent, composite in their nature. One presupposes the other.

A very famous example Nagarjuna gives is the relationship between fuel and fire. We tend to think fuel is the cause and fire is the effect and fire depends on the fuel, but we don't expect that fuel depends on fire because fuel precedes fire. But Nagarjuna shows us that in fact, the very notion of causation between fuel and fire presupposes the relationship between fuel and fire. Just as effect depends upon the cause, there is also a reverse relationship because cause depends upon the effect.

Especially if you look at it from a conceptual point of view, the fact that something is a cause presupposes an effect in relation to which that thing is a cause. The mutual dependence of causation, the relationship going both ways is an important point Nagarjuna makes.

Also, Nagarjuna analyzes how everything in the world… he, of course, brings up the example of fire and fuel which is more obvious to us and shows the mutual dependence of the relationship. Similarly, self and aggregates. The notion of self arises in relation to the aggregates and the aggregates are seen as aggregates belonging to a self, so there is a mutual relationship that we perceive in the self and aggregates.

Then, in the *Precious Garland*, for example, he suggests that the concept of *long* presupposes there being something *short*, because otherwise, longness wouldn't make any sense. Similarly, this side of the mountain presupposes there is a point of reference or contrast which is the other side of the mountain.

These are very explicitly relational terms in everyday language. Similarly, he uses relational terms that are contingent upon particular states of affairs. We can talk about that so-and-so is president or we can talk about chefs, but these terms are contingent upon a particular status or profession that the individuals have. In everyday language we use a lot of terms that are contingent upon certain things. What Nagarjuna is suggesting is that by taking these examples which are part of everyday language and everyday conventions where we use relational terms,

Nagarjuna is suggesting that we can apply this same principle across the board to everything and find relativity.

This mutual dependence concept Nagarjuna is proposing is really a radical relativity. In other words, he is basically saying that if you want to talk about conventional reality, the only sensible way in which we can talk about it are relationships, to the point of even suggesting that relationships are what exist in the end, without [going as far as] positing independent things relating to each other in a billiard-ball-hitting-each-other manner.
The relationship that Nagarjuna is talking about is in some ways interpenetrating each other. They overlap. That comes quite powerfully in the concept of three tenses of time—past, future, and present. We like to think that the three temporal stages are independent of each other, but if you look carefully, there is no such thing as an independent present. Any present you come up with has a hint of the past and an anticipation of the future. There is a kind of overlap.

So, even in our concept of reality of objects and things, although we use specific language—nouns and names—to refer to discrete objects, we tend to think each of these words refer to things that have self-enclosed discrete reality, but what Nagarjuna is pointing out is that actually if you look deeper, that does not reflect actual reality. Actual reality is much more messy and interconnected and the language is an attempt to… a heuristic device for us to make sense of the world we're experiencing and also get on with it, get on with our lives. Just because we have a heuristic practical device does not mean that device actually reflects or mirrors reality.

The point I'm trying to make is that in Nagarjuna's teachings, one of the very important points that is stressed in understanding what level of existence or truth we can accord to conventional reality, he is really emphasizing this perspective of radical relativity and that is explained in terms of mutual dependence. That, I think, is an important one and it comes up in many many chapters of the *Treatise on the Middle Way*. That's an important point. That's Nagarjuna's preferred strategy.

This deep interconnectedness and overlapping and composite nature of things, I think, is quite a helpful way of trying to get a sense of what exactly emptiness is referring to because there is nothing beyond this relationality and composite nature that there is some kind of discrete, independent object out there.

A second approach Nagarjuna brings up which comes primarily from the sutras is to drive home the illusion-like character of the conventional level of reality. Here, let me cite three very famous verses from the *Seventy Stanzas on Emptiness*. He says:

> *Just as the blessed Tathagata*
> *miraculously conjured up a conjuration,*
> *and that conjuration in turn conjured*
> *another conjuration and so on;*

Here Tathagata's conjurations are empty,
not to mention the conjurations of these conjurers!
The existence of both as mere names too,
Whatever they may be they're merely conceptualization.

Similarly, agent resembles a conjurer;
karma is like a conjurer's conjurations;
that which is devoid of inherent existence
and exists slightly, they're merely conceptualization.

Nagarjuna - Seventy Verses on Emptiness, 40-42

The imagery we have here is Buddha manifesting emanations and these emanations themselves creating more emanations and these emanations furthermore creating more emanations and each of them performing activities. Here, in the context of Tathagata conjuring emanations and these emanations themselves conjuring emanations, Nagarjuna reminds us that none of them are real. Each of them is just a conjuration.

Similarly, Nagarjuna says that the agent of karma is like the conjurer, the magician or the Tathagata. Then the karma is like the things that have been conjured. In both cases, they are devoid of intrinsic existence. He uses the phrase *exists slightly*. This is very minimalist level of existence that is being accorded and they are merely conceptualization.

These famous three stanzas are from the *Seventy Stanzas*, but they are of course in many sutras and in fact if you read Tsongkhapa's *Ocean of Reasoning*, translated into English by Geshe Ngawang Samten and Jay Garfield, at the end of almost every chapter, Tsongkhapa cites very moving passages from the sutras, most of them in verses, that really convey this poetic sense of the illusion-like character of phenomena. I think this is important.

One of the points I've tried to make is that inquiry into emptiness is not entirely an intellectual inquiry. There's also an experiential side and also, in some sense, an emotional side, where you are being asked to adjust, at a very deep level, your emotional relationship with the world and resist any urge to seek objective grounding. Appealing to that emotional aesthetic side, sometimes poetry is a much more effective method rather than didactic texts that explain in a step by step manner process in a line of logical reasonings.

This is one of the reasons why in the Tibetan tradition, the custom evolved for yogins to write experiential songs on the view. This is particularly quite widespread in the Gelug tradition. Among the most gifted writers of songs on the view are the 7th Dalai Lama, Kelzang Gyatso (1708–1757) and also Chonyi Lama Rinpoche (?) an early 20th century master. So we will see quite a lot of these poems and also Panchen Lobsang Chökyi (?) was a great writer on songs on

the view and Janggya Rölpé Dorje famously wrote a *Song on the View - Recognizing My Mother's Face*.[12]

When you are studying Tsongkhapa's Madhyamaka, it's important to also bring in, as part of your inquiry, those aspects of the tradition as well, including Tsongkhapa's own extensive citations of the more poetic aspects Mahayana sutras that present emptiness. I think this is important.

Conclusion and Key Points

To summarize, what I'm trying to say is Chandrakirti and Tsongkhapa really try quite hard to strive at clarity and detail and refinement in articulating, to the extent it is possible, to describe the status of conventional existence. Whereas Nagarjuna seems to emphasize more the approach of radical relativity primarily through the concept of mutual dependence and then the illusion-like character. In all of these cases, these masters, their attempts do indicate their admission that it is conceptually and intellectually a really hard task to come up with a full description of the status of conventional existence, but they all agree that some kind of limited existential status needs to be accorded to the conventional truth and the negation involved in the context Madhyamaka's teaching on emptiness does not refute conventional level of truth.

Let me conclude with a quotation by Tsongkhapa from his *Illuminating the Intent*, commentary on *Chandrakirti's Entering the Middle Way*. Here he says:

> *That everyday transactions remain tenable in this world posited through conceptualization represents, among the commentators of the words and meaning of the Madhyamaka treatises, a unique tradition of interpreting the noble Nāgārjuna and his son by the three masters—Buddhapālita, Śāntideva, and this master Candrakīrti. This issue [of how everyday translations remain possible in a world posited through conception] is indeed the most difficult point of the final view of the Middle Way.*
>
> *Je Tsongkhapa – Illuminating the Intent, p184*

He's really saying the ability to articulate and posit a robust reality to the everyday world in the wake of the negation of emptiness is really the most challenging aspect.

Elsewhere in the same text, Tsongkhapa gives an analogy: When you look at a reflection in the mirror, you cannot differentiate any aspect of that which doesn't look like your face. In some sense, you can't differentiate saying, "This part doesn't look like my face, this part looks like my face." In its entirety, from every aspect of that reflection, it appears as if it is one's face.

[12] A brief bio of this master and a translation of his poem along with a commentary by Ju Mipham are available in Karl Brunnholzl's book Straight From the Heart. A YouTube of His Holiness Dalai Lama teaching on this poem is available here.

In the same manner, when we perceive the everyday world, every aspect of that perception, the content of that experience, assumes or gives the impression that they have somehow intrinsic existence. He said that's why it is so challenging to accord existential status once you reject objective inherent existence. He says that this ability to posit conventional level of truth that is robust in the wake of emptiness is one of the greatest challenges for Madhyamaka philosophy.

Here, the key points of this class

- It's important to distinguish between two questions (1) what remains in the aftermath of emptiness? (2) what does the word emptiness imply? Those are two different things.
- The distinction between existence and intrinsic existence and its importance for ensuring that Madhyamaka dialectic of emptiness does not slide into nihilism. This is a constant struggle on the part of the Madhyamaka philosophy.
- Tsongkhapa's three criteria of conventional existence
- The meaning of the word convention and conventional in the context of conventional existence.
- Getting clear about what is being excluded by the word *mere* in relation to the phrases mere terms, mere conventions, and mere designations and words.
- Nagarjuna's teaching on mutual dependence which is part of his radical relativity and the illusion-like character, the two key suggestions about how to understand this radical relativistic perspective on reality.

Thank you.

Verses for Meditation Practice

LESSON FIVE: WHAT REMAINS IN THE WAKE OF EMPTINESS?

Opening: settling the mind practice

The analogy of mirror image (reflection)

And just as from an empty thing like a reflection
a perception can arise that bears its form,
likewise, although all things are empty,
they do arise from emptiness in a robust way.
—Entering the Middle Way, 6.37c-38b

ཇི་ཕྱིར་དེ་ནི་གཟུགས་བརྙན་སོགས་སྟོང་ལས། །ཤེས་པ་དེ་ཡི་རྣམ་པར་སྐྱེ་འགྱུར་ཕྱིར།།
དེ་བཞིན་དངོས་པོ་ཐམས་ཅད་སྟོང་ན་ཡང་། །སྟོང་ཉིད་དག་ལས་རབ་ཏུ་སྐྱེ་བར་འགྱུར།།

Seventh Dalai Lama's poem (extract):

To a mind drunk with sleep, all dream objects,
the elephants and horses of illusion,
seem real; but in their place is nothing.
They are only creations of the mind.

Likewise, self and others, bondage and release,
all phenomena are but constructs of words
and thinking; not an atom exists on its own,
except through designation and labeling.

Yet to the six senses of an ordinary being
veiled by the ignorance of deep sleep,
whatever appears seems objectively real.
We see this by observing our own unruly mind.
…
Joy and pain are like dreams;
material objects, a magician's show;
all sounds are echoes in empty caves.
Grasping them is a children's play.

Yet, when a face and mirror
encounter each other, face-to-face,
there is an empty image.
There is no denying this!

6 – The Two Truths: Identical or Different?

10/21/2022

Welcome to lesson six. In this class, our focus will be on the doctrine of the two truths. In the earlier class when we talked about the status of the conventional existence, we underlined the point that from the Madhyamaka point of view, especially from the point of view of teaching on emptiness, especially as read through Prasangika Madhyamaka as understood by Tsongkhapa, the most important thing is to really avoid any temptation to seek objective grounding for reality including our everyday world of lived reality.

At the same time, it's been emphasized that it's important not to veer into any form of nihilism and to find that fine line that avoids the extremes of existence and nonexistence. We then also addressed how, in a way, it was conceptually a very challenging task to articulate what the status of that actual existence is. Madhyamaka masters came up with phrases like mere conditioned-ness, dependent designations, mutual dependence, mere terms, mere names, and so on, which really try to articulate a way of according reality to the conventional world that is very limited, but at the same time, robust enough to be able to offer us means to differentiate between truth and falsity, reality and false perceptions.

Where we ended up was a very limited sense of an existential status to phenomena, referred to sometimes as mere nominality or nominal existence or mere nominal reality. What we found is that according to Madhyamaka philosophers, there is a sense in which things do not exist, anything that entails a notion of objective reality, intrinsic nature, existing in its own right, from their side, by virtue of some kind of intrinsic essence or nature or characteristic. There is a sense in which things do not definitely exist, but at the same time, they are adamant in saying that this does not constitute an acceptance of nonexistence or a rejection of existence completely. So there is also a sense in which things do exist.

This kind of paradox of accepting some kind of nonexistence but at the same time also accepting some kind of existence suggests a kind of a dual perspective here and this is what points to the teaching on the two truths. In essence, the concept or doctrine of the two truths is essentially a hermeneutic principle. It really allows the Madhyamika to have an understanding of the nature of reality that avoids the extremes of existence and nonexistence by accepting a certain level of existence, but at the same time rejecting any kind of objective existence.

If you look at it, this basic hermeneutic principle of differentiating between ultimate reality and conventional reality or relative reality is something that we find in other Buddhist schools as well. The basic idea of differentiating between two levels of reality or two kinds of truth is found in other traditions. In fact, I would argue that most Indian philosophical traditions embrace some notion or some version of the two truths principle because any philosophical school that tells us that beyond our everyday world of perceptions of our lived world there is a deeper reality is invoking this principle or differentiating between two levels of reality or two truths.

In this kind of approach generally what is perceived in everyday world is correlated with the relative level of truth and what is the deeper reality is correlated to the ultimate truth. Therefore, some version of the hermeneutic principle of two truths is, I would argue, a pan-Indian and, for that reason, Tibetan tradition as well.

But at the same time, it is actually in the Madhyamaka school that the principle of the two truths is most developed and most fleshed out and most applied in a comprehensive manner. Those who are familiar with Yogachara philosophy will know that Yogachara or Mind Only school generally tends to emphasize the framework of the three-nature theory—the imputed nature, the dependent nature, and the perfected nature. They tend to use the framework of the three-nature theory as their fundamental perspective on explaining the nature of reality as opposed to using the two truths principle, although Yogachara writings do speak of two truths because the principle of two truths is pan-Buddhist and also pan-Mahayana and the presentation of the two truths is quite frequent in Mahayana sutras that are taken as authoritative by both Yogachara and Madhyamaka.

For that reason, Yogacharas will also use the principle of two truths, but when the push comes to the shove, their preferred framework in explaining and exploring the nature of reality is the framework of the three nature theory whereas Madhyamikas really use the principle of two truths to articulate their understanding of the nature of reality.

You'll remember in one of the early classes, I spoke about how in Mahayana Madhyamaka Buddhism, the overall framework includes important correlations between three things:

1. The two truths on the ground
2. Method and wisdom on the path
3. The two buddha bodies, truth body and form bodies[, on the fruition]

There is a close correlation. The perspective on understanding the nature of reality in terms of the framework of the two truths is something very fundamental to Mahayana Buddhism.

In this class, we won't be discussing other Buddhist schools' presentation of the two truths because our focus is on Madhyamaka and in any case, it's the Madhyamaka school that really emphasizes and applies the principle of two truths in the most comprehensive manner. Here too, we will be focusing mainly on Chandrakirti as read through Tsongkhapa. So, Chandrakirti reading Nagarjuna, Tsongkhapa reading Chandrakirti is the approach here.

We will focus our discussion on the two truths primarily looking at four aspects or topics.

1. The differentiation between the two truths and the definitions that go with them. How do you define ultimate and conventional truth and how do you differentiate between the two?

2. In relation to defining the conventional truth, Chandrakirti's explanation of the three senses of the term *conventional* (S: saṃvṛti; T: ཀུན་རྫོབ་, W: kun rdzob). He proposes three distinct meanings for this term and we will discuss that.
3. What exactly is the relationship between these two truths? Are they identical? Are they different? What exactly is the nature of the relationship between the two?
4. The soteriological role of the two truths. In other words, how does the theory of the two truths relate to the project of seeking enlightenment?

These are the four main themes that I will focus on in our discussion of the two truths.

The importance of understanding the differentiation of the two truths is actually made very explicit in Nagarjuna's own writing. For example, in chapter 24 of Treatise on the Middle Way, Nagarjuna explains how Buddha taught all of his teachings on the basis of two truths. He says those who fail to differentiate between these two truths do not fully understand or appreciate the meaning of the Buddha's teaching. What are those two truths? He says they are the conventional truth and the ultimate truth.

The differentiation between the two truths and the importance of understanding the two truths as a key to understand Buddha's teachings— Nagarjuna is here thinking primarily of the Mahayana sutras—is something very explicit in Nagarjuna's own writing.

Semantics: Truth / Reality / Satya / Denpa

Before we get to the first theme, the differentiation between the two truths and their definitions, there is an important point that we have to deal with—the semantic question of the word *truth*. The word being translated is from the Sanskrit *satya* and the Tibetan *denpa* (T: བདེན་པ་, W: bden pa). In English, we have two words for the word *satya* or *denpa*, which are *truth* and *reality*.

Generally, in conventional English usage we tend to differentiate between the two. *Truth* tends to refer to statements, descriptions of reality, and *reality* tends to refer to the state of affairs, the facts themselves. In English, there is a kind of differentiation made, but the Tibetan word denpa and the Sanskrit word satya captures both *truth* in the sense of truth and falsity of statements and descriptions on the one hand and *reality* which refers to the state of affairs.

In other words, *reality* answers the question what there is, and truth answers the question of what we can say about it, whether it is true or false. That's an important semantic issue that is coming up primarily because of the translation into English of the word satya as truth. For our purpose I think it's important to remember that quite often, even though we tend to use the word ultimate truth and conventional truth, we're actually referring to reality as a state of affairs. This is something important to bear in mind as we think about this. Otherwise, when we talk about ultimate truth and conventional truth, thinking of the conventional usage of the

English term true, we may be confining our understanding primarily at the level of statements and description. This is an important semantic point to bear in mind.

Differentiating and Defining the Two Truths

Let's first deal with the differentiation of the two truths. How do we differentiate the two and how do we define each? Here, let me cite a very important stanza from Chandrakirti's *Entering the Middle Way*, chapter 6 verse 23:

> *All entities bear dual natures*
> *as obtained by correct or false views [of them].*
> *What is seen by perfect vision is the ultimate truth,*
> *and what is seen by false vision is conventional truth, it is taught.*
>
> *Chandrakirti – Entering the Middle Way, 6.23*

This is a very important stanza from Chandrakirti's Entering the Middle Way, which offers us how we can understand the differentiation between the two truths. Chandrakirti talks about how every single phenomena possesses two natures. One is a conventional nature, one is the ultimate nature. These two natures are obtained by different perceptions or different cognitions or different perspectives.

The ultimate nature is obtained or seen by the aryas' perfect vision of seeing ultimate reality. The conventional nature is the nature as seen by ordinary people whose perceptions are infected by ignorance. This is a really important point.

Chandrakirti's choice of words—each and every or all phenomena—all entities bear two natures. Chandrakirti is differentiating the two truths not as two distinct realities but as two distinct natures of one and the same reality. There is only one reality. As we understood, there is only conventional reality. Even the ultimate truth is conventionally existent. There is nothing existing in an ultimate sense.

So, Chandrakirti's choice of words is important because he's saying that two truths should not be understood as referring to false aspect of reality and true aspect of reality. Nor are they referring to two distinct realities or kinds of things. They are actually referring to two distinct natures as obtained by distinct perspectives. One seeing the ultimate nature of things. One seeing the conventional level of reality. This, I think, is a really important point to keep in mind. This becomes important later when we talk about the interrelationship between the two truths.

Now, if the two truths are differentiated from the perspective of two distinct types of cognitions or knowledge, one the knowledge of the arya beings seeing ultimate truth which is emptiness, and the other one the level of reality as seen by sentient beings in everyday worldly cognition, then how do we define conventional truth and ultimate truth?

Here in relation to the definition of the ultimate truth, there's a kind of paradox that pops up which is ultimate truth is typically, in all Madhyamaka writings as well as Yogachara, characterized as transcending language, beyond words, beyond concepts, beyond thoughts, and so on. Yet at the same time, everyone agrees that knowledge of ultimate truth is key to liberation. So, there's a kind of paradox and here Nagarjuna in fact says that without the conventional truth, one will not be able to understand the ultimate truth and without understanding the ultimate truth, there will be no liberation.

So, even Nagarjuna, who accepts ultimate truth to be transcending language, thought, and concept, agrees or admits that it is only through the conventional truth that one can have access to the ultimate truth.

Here, just to give a flavor of the definition of ultimate truth, let me cite two sutras that are cited in Chandrakirti's writings as well as in Tsongkhapa's and they are quite famous because they are cited in the context when they are defining ultimate truth. The first sutra passage is from the Meeting of the Father and Son Sutra.

> *Of these two, the Tathagata sees the conventional to be the purview of the world. That which is the ultimate is ineffable: it is not an object of knowledge, it is not an object of detailed knowledge, it is not an object of thorough knowledge, it is not shown…*
>
> *- Meeting of the Father and Son Sūtra*

Here, you can see that conventional truth is the purview of the world. There is a diversity, a perception that goes on, one can talk about cognitions. But the ultimate truth, in contrast, is ineffable, so you cannot describe it through language. It's not an object of knowledge. Cognitions cannot ascertain it. It's not an object of detailed knowledge meaning there is no differentiation going on.

The second sutra is the *Sutra Entering the Two Truths*, cited in Chandrakirti's *Entering the Middle Way* autocommentary:

> *O celestial child, if the ultimate truth, on the ultimate level, takes on the nature of being an object of body, speech, and mind, it would then not belong to what is called ultimate truth. It would become a conventional truth only. Instead, O celestial child, on the ultimate level, ultimate truth transcends all conventions. It has no differentiation; it's unborn, unceasing, free of what is uttered as well as of utterances, and free of what is known and knowing.*
>
> *- Sūtra Entering the Two Truths*

There are no dichotomies involved. There is no differentiation of object of knowledge and the knowledge itself. There is no differentiation of utterances and their content, expressions. There is no differentiation; it transcends all conventions and all language.

Similarly, most people will be familiar with this famous stanza from Shantideva's Guide to the Bodhisattva Way where he says in chapter 9:

> *The ultimate is not an object of intellect;*
> *the intellect is said to be conventional.*
>
> *Shantideva – A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life [9.2cd]*

All of these point towards a kind of a definition of ultimate truth that stresses its nature as transcending language, thought, concept, differentiation, and so on.

When it comes to actual definition, in Chandrakirti's writing, he refers to Nagarjuna's Treatise on the Middle Way, chapter 18, which we already discussed where Nagarjuna presents five attributes of the ultimate truth:

> *Not to be known from another person,*
> *free [from intrinsic nature],*
> *not postulated through elaboration,*
> *devoid of falsifying conceptualization,*
> *not having many separate meanings—*
> *this is the nature of reality.*
>
> *Nāgārjuna – Root Verses on The Middle Way, 18:9*

These are five attributes that we already discussed earlier and one important point to note is that all of these attributes are negative attributes, explained from a negative perspective. That, in a nutshell, is the definition of ultimate truth and, briefly put, ultimate truth is the truth that is obtained from the perspective of an arya's direct perception of emptiness. That is what is found by the wisdom of emptiness—the ultimate truth—and it transcends language, thought, and so on.

The conventional truth is the contrast of that. Conventional truth is defined as the nature of reality that is obtained by perspectives of the everyday world of convention. It's contrasted to the ultimate and here again it is helpful to recall the importance of the distinction between two domains of discourse and two forms of analysis that we already touched upon in one of the classes. Again, this comes up quite often in Madhyamaka discourse in relation to the two truths, in relation to making sure that there is satisfaction with no analysis. There is no urge or temptation to go beyond the boundary of conventional framework.

All of these are correlated, so it is a very subtle point being made. Both of those relate to two distinct natures of one and the same reality because Nagarjuna and Chandrakirti and Tsongkhapa, when they talk about two truths, according to the Madhyamaka, it is very clear

that they are telling us that it is important to not have the temptation to think in terms of two different kinds of reality. There is only one and the same world. There are no two worlds here.

We are talking about two distinct natures, conventional level of nature and the ultimate nature of reality. This is important because in the end if we're talking about two different realities then if ultimate reality, which is emptiness, pertains only to ultimate reality, then no amount of meditation and cultivation of that understanding can have an impact on our perception of the everyday world. There is only one world, there is only one reality. We can have distinct perspectives on this and so this is an important point.

Chandrakirti's Explanation of Convention

In relation to defining conventional truth, the second point I want to discuss in this class is Chandrakirti's explanation of the three distinct senses of the word saṃvṛti which is translated as conventional here. The Tibetan word is kündzob. It is helpful because otherwise, quite often, because the same word is being used, we may assume a uniform meaning and then we read the text in a wrong way.

He says the first meaning of the word conventional or saṃvṛti is its role as a concealer. Saṃvṛti-satya or conventional truth, here conventional refers to an obscuration, an obscuring mind, the ignorant perspective, which prevents us or obscures the sight or vision of actual reality. The first one really refers to the ignorant mind, the grasping at intrinsic existence. That's the concealer, saṃvṛti. The Sanskrit word saṃvṛti in fact has that connotation of a veil, a cover, a concealer.

The second meaning, he says, is dependent origination, because the saṃvṛti can be understood in terms of dependent origination. Things coming in dependence upon each other.

The third meaning he explains as agreement governing the use of symbols or signs, here talking about language. Saṅketaḥ is the [Sanskrit] word used for signs. Here, the signs include linguistic expressions and the objects of the expressions as well as cognitions and their objects of cognition, epistemic objects. The third sense is really the conventional in the sense of worldly convention, which uses the various conventions to characterize, uses dichotomies and so on, to create the multiple perspective on the world, the perspective of multiplicity in the world.

So it is important to understand that there are three distinct senses in which the term saṃvṛti or conventional can be used in the Madhyamaka writings.

If we look at how Tsongkhapa understands these three based on reading Chandrakirti, he understands the first usage as referring to the grasping at intrinsic existence, the ignorant mind that obscures, that prevents us, that veils our vision of ultimate reality. He says this is the sense in which the term is used when we give the etymology of the word conventional truth, saṃvṛti-satya, because things are real only for the ignorant mind. So this is saṃvṛti-satya, conventional truth, that things are true or real from the perspective of the ignorant mind grasping at

inherent existence. Tsongkhapa says this meaning is appropriate when we look at the etymology of the word saṃvṛti-satya, conventional truth.

The second sense, dependent origination, he says is really better understood as referring to conventional existence. Conventional existence can only be understood in terms of dependent origination, dependent designation. Here, dependent origination and dependent designation covers not just the world of conventional reality, but also emptiness and ultimate truth as well because even emptiness is relational. We can only speak of emptiness of something. There is no one mother emptiness that embraces all emptiness. Emptiness, in the end, even though it points towards ultimate nature of reality, emptiness is still conceptually designated. Emptiness is defined in relation to the phenomena. Dependent origination covers both the conventional truth as well as ultimate truth. It's a more inclusive category.

When the term saṃvṛti, the conventional, is used in the second sense, it should be understood as the sense in which we can speak of conventional existence. Conventional existence covers everything because nothing exists ultimately. If there is anything existing it has to be on the level of conventional existence.

The third sense, he says, is the actual meaning in the context of conventional truth. Here, conventional truth refers to the level of reality or truth where existence of things are defined in relation to the worldly conventions and worldly practices in which cause and effect, all the relationships, expressions and their content, cognitions and their epistemic objects; all of these are defined relationally within the framework of everyday worldly activity and worldly practices and transaction. So, conventional in the third sense, saṃvṛti in the third sense, is the real meaning when we talk about conventional truth.

This kind of striving for clarity, so that we don't confuse the understanding of the meaning with the assumption that there is a uniform meaning to a term like saṃvṛti or conventional is really important for Chandrakirti and Tsongkhapa and particularly for Tsongkhapa. One of the things that we have to appreciate is Tsongkhapa is constantly striving to ensure that the Madhyamaka philosophy is not read in a way that can lead to nihilism and Madhyamaka philosophy should be understood in a way that does not undermine one's commitment and belief and conviction in the law of cause and effect or the norms of good and bad. Moral actions, what is to be adopted, what is to be abandoned, or one's understanding of emptiness should not undermine the commitment to the path of enlightenment, the whole soteriological project.

Therefore, for Tsongkhapa, striving for clarity, being able to get to this refined, fine-tuning of the Madhyamaka philosophy with relation to emptiness, with relation to the status of the conventional truth, with relation to the meaning of even the words like *conventional* is really crucial. This is something that one needs to understand because Tsongkhapa is a great teacher and practitioner but is also a great philosopher and the philosopher's task is to seek conceptual clarity and also see all the important implications in other domains for whatever position that you hold. I think it is important as we read Tsongkhapa and understand his process, to really

appreciate the larger background of his motivation of why he is insisting on delving ever deeper and seeking ever clearer understanding and differentiation.

How are the Two Truths Related?

Now let's go the third point, which is the interrelationship between the two truths. What is the connection between the two truths? Earlier, by citing Chandrakirti, I said the two truths are defined as two distinct natures. Remember he said all entities bear dual natures. So two truths are really best understood as two distinct natures as found from the perspectives of aryas' vision of ultimate truth and ordinary beings cognition of worldly convention.

So what exactly is the relation between the two? Are they identical or are they different? The fact that they point towards dual natures, distinct natures, suggests some kind of distinctness, but at the same time, if they are too separate, if they are independent of each other, then it becomes very hard to explain why a realization of ultimate truth could undermine or eliminate ignorance in relation to phenomena that bind us. Getting that relationship between the two truths right is important to understand how the wisdom of emptiness can actually eliminate ignorance.

In some sense, the two truths are identical because remember earlier, I cited from Nagarjuna's Seventy Stanzas where he says that emptiness or ultimate truth is nothing other than the *fact* of things being devoid of intrinsic existence.

> *Since all things are empty of intrinsic existence,*
> *the peerless Tathagata has clearly taught*
> *this truth of dependent origination*
> *with respect to all things.*
>
> *This [alone] exhausts the ultimate truth;*
> *the conventions posited for the sake of the world,*
> *the fully awakened Blessed One labeled*
> *all these varied facts as 'truths' [as well].*
>
> *Nāgārjuna - Seventy Verses on Emptiness, 68-69*

You remember? He uses the phrase *this alone exhausts ultimate truth*. He says there is no description of the ultimate beyond the fact that things are devoid of intrinsic existence.

Similarly, we are familiar with important passages in the *Heart Sutra* where Buddha says that form *is* emptiness, emptiness *is* form. There is an equation between form and emptiness. He even goes further and says there is no emptiness other than form, apart from form and there is no form apart from emptiness. So, the equation between form and emptiness is very explicit in the sutra itself.

Similarly, earlier when we talked about Tsongkhapa's quest for the view, one of the important discoveries that was part of his eureka moment was a new understanding of the equation between emptiness and dependent origination. How dependent origination and emptiness are two sides of the same coin. There is definitely an important equation and identity between the two.

At the same time as Chandrakirti explicitly tells us in his definition of the two truths, they refer to dual natures, distinct natures of one and the same reality. There is a kind of a distinctness as well. How do we understand this paradox of being the same as well as different? Being identical as well as distinct.

Here, the Tibetan masters use the phraseology of *same entity with conceptually distinct identities*— ngowo chik la dok pé ta dé (T: ངོ་བོ་གཅིག་ལ་ལྡོག་པའི་ཐ་དད་, W: ngo bo gcig la ldog pa'i tha dad). That's a little tough one to get a sense, but to use modern philosophical terminology, we could say that ontologically they are identical but conceptually they as distinct. That's one way of getting at it.

This will become a little bit clearer if we look at the relationship between, for example, the concept of something being a product and something being impermanent. They are conceptually distinct because when you understand something as a product, you need not necessarily understand that it is impermanent. *Being a product* does not have as its meaning impermanence but at the same time, anything that is a product is necessarily impermanent. One kind of implies the other, logically, but they refer to distinct attributes. Although they refer to distinct attributes, the actual thing that they are referring to is one and the same entity. I think *ontologically identical and conceptually distinct* is a good way of looking at this traditional phraseology of *one entity and conceptually distinct identities*—ngowo chik la dok pé ta dé.

Here, let me cite a really helpful passage from Nagarjuna's *Commentary on the Awakening Mind*, *Bodhicittavivaraṇa*. By the way, although Tibetan tradition attributes this *Commentary on the Awakening Mind* to Nagarjuna, which is traditionally accepted in the Tibetan tradition, but strictly speaking, the ascription of that is probably not well founded because the text contains references to certain philosophical distinctions which are historically later than Nagarjuna.[13] But in any case, tradition accepts this to be by Nagarjuna. Regardless of whether it

[13] The western scholarly tradition's view on this seems undecided as yet. Footnote 15 of Karl Brunnholzl's *In Praise of Dharmadhatu* says:

The authorship of this text has been disputed by many, mainly based on the grounds that it speaks about the three natures and the ālaya-consciousness, which are assumed by these critics to be later Yogācāra notions. However, that Nāgārjuna was familiar with the three natures is also evidenced by his Acintyastava, which mentions the first two natures in verses 44–45. As Lindtner 1992 (p. 253) points out, lines 45cd are moreover identical to Laṅkāvatārasūtra II.191ab. His article presents detailed evidence throughout Nāgārjuna's texts that the latter not only knew but also greatly relied on an early version of the Laṅkāvatārasūtra—which despite, no doubt, being a major source for later Yogācāras also criticizes (earlier) reifying versions of Yogācāra/ Vijñānavāda. Furthermore, verses 33–35 of the Bodhicittavivaraṇa on the ālaya-consciousness almost literally correspond to three verses from the Ghanavyūhasūtra (P778, fols. 49b7–50a2), which is also a major Yogācāra source.

is by Nagarjuna or not, but it is an important Madhyamaka text, a really powerful one. Let me read from this text:

> *Independent of the conventional,*
> *no ultimate truth can be found.*
> *The conventional is taught to be emptiness;*
> *emptiness itself is the conventional;*
> *one does not occur without the other,*
> *just as being produced and impermanent.*
>
> *Nagarjuna – Commentary on the Awakening Mind, 67c-68*

This text explicitly gives the analogy of the relationship between something being a product and something being impermanent. They are conceptually distinct, have distinct meanings, but they refer to one and the same thing. Similarly, in this text, it says that independent of the conventional truth, there is no ultimate truth to be found because ultimate truth refers to emptiness and emptiness is always emptiness of something. So, you cannot find a self-standing emptiness on its own independent of a basis upon which emptiness is defined.

Therefore, the text says the conventional is taught to be empty. Remember the Seventy Stanzas line, this alone exhausts ultimate truth? The fact of things being devoid of intrinsic existence itself is the ultimate truth.

Then, the text goes on to say that emptiness itself is the conventional. This is an important point because once you describe the conventional phenomena to be empty then there is a danger of reifying that emptiness thinking that even though conventional truths are devoid of intrinsic existence, but the fact that they are empty of intrinsic existence is true, therefore, this is the absolute truth, this must have some kind of absolute status. So again, to avoid that, to point towards emptiness of emptiness, the text says emptiness itself is the conventional. Its existence is only conventional.

This, I think, is a really helpful passage from an Indian text that conveys this idea of the relationship. The relationship is very close. They are conceptually distinct, but they are ontologically one and the same thing. Of course, as I said earlier, this identity of conventional truth and ultimate truth resonates the famous passage from the Heart Sutra, which I cited earlier, form is emptiness and emptiness is form.

For those who are interested in delving deeper, there is in fact four sets of unwanted consequences thrown in the *Samdhinirmocana Sutra*, *Sutra Unraveling the Intent* of the Buddha, which is cited quite often in later Madhyamaka and Yogachara texts, about the relationship between ultimate truth and conventional truth, that if they are exactly ontologically the same, there will be four consequences. If they are ontologically distinct or different, then there will be four unwanted consequences. But if they are not conceptually distinct and they are conceptually identical, then there will be four unwanted consequences. In

English translations, for example, Jeffrey Hopkins, *Meditations on Emptiness*, contains these two sets of four unwanted consequences that pertain to the relationship between the two truths. It would be helpful if you want to go deeper, to take a look.

The Soteriological Role of the Two Truths

We now go to the final point which is the soteriological role of the two truths. Roughly put, the conventional truth allows us to get about in the world and fulfill our everyday worldly aims. If we are not able to make distinctions within the conventional framework of what is true and what is false, we have a problem. The conventional truths really allow us to function in the everyday world and achieve our worldly aims, but if we are serious about attaining liberation or seeking enlightenment, then we need ultimate truth, the knowledge of ultimate truth.

To function within the world, you don't need the knowledge of ultimate truth, but to attain liberation and gain enlightenment, you need the knowledge of ultimate truth. The role of the knowledge of ultimate truth is to lead to enlightenment. Also, ultimate truth describes the ultimate nature of reality. Remember in the first class, we talked about how, according to Madhyamaka masters, there is no second door to liberation? The only door to liberation is through the knowledge of emptiness, which is the ultimate truth here.

Then, the question is, as we discussed in the context of the definition of ultimate truth: if the only door to liberation or enlightenment is through the knowledge of emptiness, yet emptiness and ultimate truth are defined as being beyond language, concept, and thought, and beyond cognition, then how… we're kind of stuck aren't we? Paralyzed in approaching emptiness, in approaching ultimate truth. Here, I think it's really important to, once again, take a look at what Nagarjuna says about the role of the two truths. In the *Treatise on the Middle Way*, he says:

> *Without relying on the conventional,*
> *the ultimate truth cannot be taught;*
> *without realizing the ultimate truth,*
> *nirvana cannot be attained.*
>
> *Nagarjuna - Root Verses on the Middle Way, 24:10*

So there's a kind of chain of causation that is talked about here. Similarly, in Chandrakirti's *Entering the Middle Way* he writes:

> *The conventional truth is the means,*
> *while the ultimate truth is its end.*
> *Those who fail to know the distinction between the two*
> *will enter wrong paths through false conceptualization.*
>
> *Chandrakirti - Entering the Middle Way, 6:80*

Chandrakirti is even more explicit in saying that the conventional truth is the means by which one will access the ultimate truth and the ultimate truth is the end that one is seeking, for those who are interested in seeking enlightenment.

What does it mean to say for the conventional truth to be means leading us to emptiness, leading us to ultimate truth, especially when ultimate truth is said to be beyond language, concept, and thought and while conventional truth relates to the world only through these conventions, language, concept, and differentiation? There is a kind of a paradox here.

Remember earlier, in one of the classes we discussed Tsongkhapa was insistent that if emptiness cannot be accessed through inferential cognition—through language and concept, through reasoning—then for beginners, we simply don't have any access to emptiness or ultimate truth. The only option left would be either through a leap of faith or through some kind of guru's blessing.

There were Tibetan masters who did suggest that for the beginners, those are the only options left in terms of having access to emptiness, but Tsongkhapa does not agree with that. He is insistent that given that Chandrakirti explicitly says and Nagarjuna says that without relying on the conventional, ultimate truth cannot be taught. Similarly Chandrakirti says that conventional truth is the means. So, if we are serious about conventional truth being the means, we need to find a way to somehow understand how do we access ultimate truth, how do we access emptiness, through the conventional truth. In class 1, I also cited a passage from the sutra which said that:

> *All the sacred teachings*
> *of the Tathagata*
> *engage with suchness,*
> *they converge on suchness,*
> *and they point towards suchness.*
>
> *- Unattributed sutra*

That is one way of understanding how even though ultimate truth transcends language, concept, and thought, but the sutras can still teach emptiness because if we say that language and thought and concept do not provide us any access at all to ultimate truth, then we will find ourselves in this absurd position where we say that none of the sutras actually present emptiness, none of the sutras actually present the ultimate truth. There must be a deeper meaning in which sense one has to understand what does it mean for ultimate truth to be transcending language, concepts, and thoughts, yet at the same time, providing access to the knowledge.

Tsongkhapa's understanding is that yes, language and thought and concepts cannot fully capture the nature of the ultimate truth but they can point towards it. The way in which they

can point towards it is primarily through the approach of via negativa. Helping us go through a progressive removal of layers and layers of our false conceptualization and removal of the reification that we have constructed on reality. That via negativa function of language can help us point towards the ultimate truth and emptiness to the point where we can actually have a meaningful inferential understanding and cognition and realization of emptiness.

This is what is meant by conventional truth being the means because without conventional truth, without the language, without concepts, without teachings of the sutras, we just don't have a way of approaching ultimate truth.

In talking about the sequence of the knowledge between the two truths, conventional truth versus ultimate truth, here's an important passage from Tsongkhapa in his *Illuminating the Intent*:

> *Although individual examples of conventional truth, such as vase and so on, can be obtained even by those who have not found the Middle Way view, to ascertain a particular phenomenon as a conventional truth by means of a valid cognition, one must first gain the Middle Way view.*

He's making a distinction between having knowledge of individual conventional truths like a vase on the one hand, and ascertaining these conventional realities to be conventional truths on the other. For the first, you don't need knowledge of emptiness, everybody can do it. But for the second, you do need the realization of emptiness. You do need to find the Middle Way view. Continuing the reading:

> *Because if a given phenomenon had been established as a conventional truth, this would mean that it would be established as false;*

… because conventional truth is contrasted to ultimate truth …

> *and to establish something explicitly as false, one first has to negate true existence with respect to that phenomenon by means of valid cognition. … For example, when the spectators at a magic show see conjured horses and elephants, they do see false things, but they do not necessarily establish these perceptions to be false. Therefore, the fact obtained through seeing false reality, which defines something to be a conventional truth, refers to that which is obtained by valid conventional cognition perceiving false and deceptive objects of cognition.*
>
> *Je Tsongkhapa – Illuminating the Intent, p224*

In the case of recognizing the conjurations as being mere conjurations, you need to have the knowledge that this is a magical show. What you're perceiving is false. In the same manner, in order for things to be perceived as conventional truths, one needs to have the knowledge of

the ultimate truth first because ultimate truth refers to a truth and the conventional truth is in contrast to that ultimate truth.

This is something that we will touch upon a bit later as well—the realization of something as conventionally real or mere conventional truth arises only in the aftermath of realizing emptiness and this also comes when you see things in the aftermath of realizing emptiness when you then look at the world again, you perceive the world in a different light, as illusion-like and as mere conventions. Understanding conventional truth requires the ability to see things as illusion-like, devoid of intrinsic existence. This is what Tsongkhapa is bringing up here.

In a nutshell, how the knowledge of ultimate truth helps us towards liberation is really helping us see the falsity of the perspective of our ignorant mind. Our ignorant mind conjures us a perception of the world where we assume intrinsic existence, objective existence. We assume discrete realities to the things that we perceive. By gaining the knowledge of ultimate truth, which is essentially knowledge of emptiness, we see through this deception created by the ignorant mind and in this way, we completely change our outlook on reality. As we thin this tendency to project intrinsic existence on reality, then we refrain further and further from our urge to grasp and then build upon that reification.

Along with that, we'll also diminish our tendency to emotionally react with anger, with attachment, with pride, with jealousy and so on. In this way, gradually, the grasping gets thinned. It's not like the example of switching on a light and everything becomes bright because the grasping is so deeply ingrained that a single instance of the knowledge of emptiness cannot remove that grasping. The single instance of the knowledge of emptiness may shine the light but we need to continue to shine the light and make that light brighter to be able to gradually diminish the force of that tendency to grasp.

In this way, finally we get to a point where we are totally at home with the feeling of groundlessness, without any urge felt to seek grounding or objective fact to hold on to. There will be a total freedom. In one of the classes I talked about what Nagarjuna means by silencing of the conceptual chatter, conceptual elaboration. In this way, the knowledge of ultimate truth really leads to liberation and knowledge of ultimate truth also leads to a complete radical shift in the way in which we perceive ourselves, our existence, and the world around us. This also touches upon the theme of our first class, why emptiness matters. In the end, knowledge of emptiness is the only door to liberation.

With respect to sources in Tsongkhapa's own writing on the topic of the two truths, I would like to draw your attention to three important sources.

1. The insight section of the *Middle Length Lamrim*. There is a specific section on the presentation of the two truths.
2. *Illuminating the Intent*, Chapter 6, in relation to Chandrakirti's presentation of the two truths. Tsongkhapa's presentation here is quite extensive.

3. *Ocean of Reasoning*, Chapter 24 in the commentary to Nagarjuna's *Treatise on the Middle Way*, which is on the four noble truths. There is a section in that context on the two truths in Nagarjuna's text and that section of Tsongkhapa's commentary also contains a succinct presentation of the two truths

When looking for resources in Tsongkhapa's own writings on the topic of two truths from the Madhyamaka perspective, these three sources in his Madhyamaka writings are important.

Conclusion and Key Points

Let's summarize the key points.

- The theory of two truths is crucial for understanding the nature of reality according to Madhyamaka. It is the Madhyamaka school that really develops, fleshes out, and applies in a comprehensive way the framework of the two truths in their understanding of the nature of reality.
- According to Nagarjuna and Chandrakirti as read by Tsongkhapa, the two truths relate to two distinct natures of reality defined from two distinct perspectives. The ultimate nature that is empty and the conventional nature as constitutive of our world of everday practices.
- The two truths are ontologically identical but conceptually distinct, each with its own defining characteristics.
- While conventional truth is the means, the ultimate truth is the end and the knowledge of both are indispensable for the attainment of enlightenment.

Verses for Meditation Practice

Opening: settling the mind practice

Analogy of magical illusion

Equation of emptiness and dependent origination (unity of the two truths):

What is dependent origination,
this we declare to be emptiness.
It is a dependent designation;
this, then, is the middle way.
—MMK, 24.18

རྟེན་ཅིང་འབྱུང་བ་འཚུངས་པ་གང་།། དེ་ནི་སྟོང་པ་ཉིད་དུ་བཤད།།
དེ་ནི་བརྟེན་ནས་གདགས་པ་སྟེ། །དེ་ནི་དབུ་མའི་ལམ་ཡིན་ནོ།།

7 – The Svātantrika-Prāsaṅgika Distinction

11/4/2022

Welcome to lesson seven. This lesson is particularly focused on a very important topic in Tibetan Madhyamaka philosophy which was made even more important through Tsongkhapa's contribution to Madhyamaka philosophy. By this, I'm talking about the distinction between the Svatantrika and Prasangika Madhyamaka schools.

As to what exactly is the point of departure between these two strands of Madhyamaka, Svatantrika on the one hand headed by masters like Bhaviveka, Jnanagarbha, Shantarakshita, and so on, and Prasangika on the other, which is Buddhapalita and Chandrakirti, what exactly is the point of departure between these two schools and what is at issue that is disputed between the two schools, there is a diversity of opinions among Tibetan interpreters of Madhyamaka, so there is no real consensus.

Backdrop: Nagarjuna <-- Buddhapalita <-- Bhaviveka <-- Chandrakirti

Where there is consensus is the recognition that the locus classicus of the distinction between the two strands of Madhyamaka emerges from Bhaviveka's critique of Buddhapalita's commentary on Nagarjuna's *Treatise on the Middle Way*. Particularly Bhaviveka's critique of Buddhapalita for failing to use probative arguments, svatantra, which is an autonomous syllogism to prove the truth of emptiness and resorting only to using consequential reasoning that aims to demonstrate internal inconsistency within the opponent's position.

Bhaviveka criticizes Buddhapalita for not doing justice to the teaching on emptiness by Nagarjuna and not fleshing out the full reasoning, the logical reasoning including probative proofs to establish the truth.

Then, about a century later, Chandrakirti responds to Bhaviveka's criticism of Buddhapalita and responds to those criticisms one-by-one as well as levels objections against Bhaviveka's own reading. So it is on the basis of this debate between Buddhapalita and Bhaviveka and Chandrakirti—Bhaviveka critiquing Buddhapalita and Chandrakirti responding and critiquing Bhaviveka further that this distinction between two strands of Madhyamaka interpretation of Nagarjuna emerges.

The terms Svatantrika Madhyamaka and Prasangika Madhyamaka are, admittedly, Tibetan inventions and probably goes to the early period of Patsap Lotsawa, the influential translator of Chandrakirti's writing into Tibetan. So, there is a consensus both among Tibetan thinkers as well as contemporary scholars on Madhyamaka philosophy that actually we can trace the invention of the terms Svatantrika versus Prasangika to Patsap Lotsawa.

What is special about Tsongkhapa's contribution here is to really take this distinction between Svatantrika and Prasangika seriously and elaborate and refine it and get to a much more in-depth analysis of what is at stake between these two diverse strands of interpreting Nagarjuna.

Over time, in the Tibetan tradition, these two distinct strands of interpreting Nagarjuna came to be almost recognized as subschools within the Madhyamaka tradition. Today, in the doxographical literature in Tibetan texts, we would refer to these two as subschools of Madhyamaka philosophy. That's the backdrop.

Methodological or Substantive Difference?

Within the Tibetan tradition, there are two camps as to their attitude towards and understanding of the distinction between the two Madhyamaka schools. One is a camp that really recognizes the difference between the two primarily at the level of methodology. In other words, what is the best logical method to be applied in establishing the truth of emptiness, bringing the concept of emptiness to the opponent?

Bhaviveka emphasizing the use of autonomous syllogism, reasoning, and probative proof, and Chandrakirti insisting on the choice of using Prasangika consequential type reasoning. So, this first camp of Tibetans maintain that the difference is really at the level of methodology of how best to convey the truth of emptiness and that there is no substantive philosophical difference between Bhaviveka and Chandrakirti or the two subschools of Madhyamaka.

There is another camp to which Tsongkhapa belongs and probably is the most vocal proponent of that camp, where this surface level methodological difference really reflects a more substantive underlying philosophical difference between the two interpretations of Nagarjuna. Part of that difference emerges in how they understand the status of conventional existence, conventional truth. Here, for example, Tsongkhapa's own teacher Rendawa maintains that the main difference between the two schools really emerges in relation to the status of the conventional truth.

Tsongkhapa himself goes even further and says that the main difference emerges in the context of whether or not Madhyamaka should accept any notion of intrinsic nature or intrinsic characteristics—svalakṣaṇa is a key term here, intrinsic characteristic (Tib. རང་མཚན་; rang tsen, Wyl. rang mtshan) —even on the conventional level. Tsongkhapa maintains that if you dig deeply, Bhaviveka and his followers like Jnanagarbha and Shantarakshita, their writings suggest that at some level, they do accept the validity of svalakṣaṇa, intrinsic characteristic and intrinsic nature, at least on the conventional level although they might reject it at the ultimate level.

For Chandrakirti, notions like essence, intrinsic nature, intrinsic characteristic, svalakṣaṇa, svabhāva, all of these are untenable, not only on the ultimate level, but even on the conventional level as well. Tsongkhapa therefore maintains that the methodological difference really reflects and underlines substantive philosophical differences, both in relation to the conventional truth as well as in relation to the subtlety of the formulation of the ultimate truth.

In any case these are the two main camps and Tsongkhapa's writings particularly contain extensive explanation of the point of departure between the two strands of Madhyamaka right

from the beginning when he wrote his first major book on Madhyamaka philosophy which is the insight section on the *Lamrim Chenmo*. There is an extensive section dealing with what is at stake, what is the difference between these two strands in their interpretation. Similarly he picks up on this them again in his next major work on Madhyamaka, the *Essence of Eloquence*, his hermeneutic text. Again, in that volume, there is an explicit section dealing quite extensively picking up on this discussion of the distinction between the two schools. Tsongkhapa delves quite deeply into this.

Tsongkhapa's Creative Perspective

Of course, Tsongkhapa himself admits that if you look on the surface, in the Indian sources themselves, he admits that there is not much to differentiate between these two strands of Madhyamaka. They all interpret Nagarjuna as rejecting the notion of true existence, objective existence, intrinsic nature and so on. Similarly, with respect to a conventional truth, both strands of Madhyamaka use a similar kind of language that conventional truths are truths that are presented from within the limited perspective of worldly conventions—they reflect a perspective without analysis within the framework of everyday worldly practice and transactions.

So, when you read the interpretation of Nagarjuna either by Bhaviveka or Chandrakirti, there is not much to differentiate them on the surface. Similarly, Tsongkhapa admits that even commentators of Bhaviveka like Avalokitavrata who is a major commentator on Bhaviveka as well as Jnanagarbha and Shantarakshita who are subsequent Madhyamaka thinkers, none of them seem to suggest that there is any substantive philosophical difference when it comes to the ultimate nature of reality between the two Madhyamaka masters Bhaviveka and Chandrakirti. Tsongkhapa admits that the Indian textual sources on the surface don't seem to support any kind of attribution of substantive philosophical difference.

Therefore, when reading Tsongkhapa's take on the distinction between Svatantrika and Prasangika, it is important not to be confused thinking that Tsongkhapa is attempting to reproduce faithfully or reconstruct faithfully Indian Madhyamaka sources.

What Tsongkhapa is doing is a very creative deep philosophical reading of the Indian Madhyamaka texts and really fleshing out the implications of the positions that these specific Madhyamaka masters take. Based upon this deep philosophical reading of these Indian Madhyamaka sources, Tsongkhapa then comes to the conclusion that the difference between the two strands is not purely or simply at the methodological level. The difference in the methodology itself suggests a deeper underlying substantive philosophical difference which compels them to take that stand with respect to methodology. So, there's a reason why they insist on different methodology as the best means for conveying the truth of emptiness. I think it is important to keep that in mind.

Bhaviveka as an Accidental Realist

What Tsongkhapa is essentially suggesting is that if you read Bhaviveka quite closely, his two main writings, one of which is his commentary on Nagarjuna's *Treatise on the Middle Way,* The *Lamp of Wisdom*, *Prajñāpradīpa*, which is one of the largest, actually among the Indian sources, this is the most extensive commentary on Nagarjuna's *Treatise on the Middle Way*, as well as his other independent work which is the *Essence of the Middle Way*, a root text in verse as well as his own autocommentary, *Blaze of Reasoning*.

In these texts, if you read them carefully, there emerges a pattern in Bhaviveka's reading of Nagarjuna and that suggests that some kind of residual realism, one might call it, kind of a residual realism on the part of Bhaviveka all of which point towards Bhaviveka's attempt to ground conventional reality in some kind of objective facts. To seek some kind of objective grounding to conventional reality. I will go through these key sources of Bhaviveka which Tsongkhapa sees as evidence pointing towards his residual realism.

One of these which Tsongkhapa identifies is Bhaviveka's constant attempt in various instances to try to specific the exact referents of key terms. For example, with relation to the term *person* or *self*, Bhaviveka explicitly critiques Buddhapalita who rejects there being any referent to the term self and says that that is nihilistic. He says that for Buddhapalita, the term self seems to be almost equivalent to the term horn of a rabbit with no reference, no content. So, Bhaviveka, on his part, then says, "I would say the term self refers to consciousness, because consciousness is what takes rebirth, consciousness is what connects to the next life. Therefore, I say consciousness is the referent of the term self."

You can see in Bhaviveka, in various instances, a serious attempt at specifying what the terms refer to, which Tsongkhapa sees as a real problem here. In other words, although Bhaviveka uses the catchphrase *satisfaction with no analysis* and agrees with Nagarjuna and Chandrakirti that the conventional perspective, the conventional cognition should stay within the confine of conventional truth and be contented with not analyzing beyond that framework, but in the end Bhaviveka himself seems to be constantly searching for referents of terms, so there is an attempt to seek something beyond and behind the terms.

Anyway, Tsongkhapa is making the point that because there is this attempt to search for the referents of terms beyond the terms themselves, there is a kind of an attempt to seek objective grounding for everyday reality and this kind of objective grounding for Tsongkhapa is impossible. That's one important point.

Four Instances of Bhaviveka's Residual Realism

Let me cite four instances in Bhaviveka's writings that Tsongkhapa finds really problematic and potentially pointing towards some kind of residual realism on the part of Bhaviveka.

As we discussed earlier, one is Bhaviveka's insistence on the use of probative proof, a kind of autonomous syllogism as a way of establishing the truth of emptiness in the context of reasoning. By autonomous syllogism or reasoning we refer to a form of logical reasoning that meets the trifold criteria. This is a very standard format of logical argument developed and made famous especially by Dignaga and later by Dharmakirti.

A valid logical argument must meet three criteria. The reasoning that is presented should be established on the basis upon which the reasoning is being made. If you have [the syllogism] for example, "sound is impermanent because it is a product," you have three members, the subject, the predicate, and the proof, which is the reasoning sign. The three marks or criteria is that (1) the reasoning, which is "being a product," should be established on the subject, which is "sound." (2) Whatever is impermanent must necessarily be a product. That pervasion is the second mark. (3) Whatever is not a product must necessarily be not impermanent. That's the reverse negative form of pervasion. These three criteria must be fulfilled for any valid logical argument.

Furthermore, Bhaviveka's autonomous proof reasoning also suggests that the three members of the argument, the subject, the predicate, and the proof or reason, must be something that is established commonly for both parties. That's another important criteria of an autonomous proof or reasoning. For Tsongkhapa, this insistence on the need to establish commonly for both parties the subject, the predicate, and the reasoning, is problematic because it presupposes a consensus on the nature of these things on the part of both parties.

Imagine a realist who believes in intrinsic existence of phenomena and a non-realist, like a Madhyamaka, entering into debate. In order to establish the proof of emptiness, the Madhyamika needs to establish commonly accepted three members of the proof [syllogism], the subject, predicate, and the reasoning sign, then it becomes problematic because both parties fundamentally differ on the status and nature of each of these three members. For one, everything is devoid of intrinsic existence, for the other, everything possesses intrinsic existence. So, Chandrakirti critiques Bhaviveka for insisting on the need for common ground.

From Chandrakirti's point of view the reasoning can function effectively so long as both parties, in their own ways, accept the three members. We don't need to have a common agreement, but if you accept the existence of sound, impermanence, and product, and then the opponent also accepts this, then on the basis of one's own acceptance of these three members, reasoning [debate] can proceed. Bhaviveka insists on these three members of the logical argument to be commonly established, then that is assuming some kind of objective existence that is independent out there. That's one very important source that Tsongkhapa sees as potentially pointing towards some kind of realism.

The second is a more exegetically complex one. In Bhaviveka's Madhyamaka texts, both in *Essence of the Middle Way* as well as *Lamp of Wisdom*, there is a huge critique of cittamatra, mind-only school in one of the later chapters of his commentary on Nagarjuna's *Treatise of the*

Middle Way where he goes on a side discussion and subjects cittamatra's view of three natures to a sustained critique.

To summarize, cittamatra rejects intrinsic nature or intrinsic existence with regard to the imputed nature but attributes intrinsic existence to the dependent nature or the perfected nature. Bhaviveka criticizes cittamatra's rejection of intrinsic existence to imputed nature saying that they have fallen into nihilism. By rejecting intrinsic existence in the imputed nature, cittamatras are defying conventional truth and they are actually denigrating conventional truth which, for Tsongkhapa, suggests that Bhaviveka himself accepts intrinsic existence of the imputed nature. That, again, is seen as a second problematic source in Bhaviveka's writing that suggests some kind of commitment to residual realism.

The third one, Bhaviveka… as we discussed in the last class, within conventional truth you can have valid conventional truth and invalid conventional truth based on whether or not the cognition that perceives them are suffering from temporary causes of illusion. For example, a mirage is an invalid conventional truth because it is mistakenly perceived as water. Water is a conventionally valid truth because within everyday conventions of the world, water is seen as water. In Bhaviveka's writings, this distinction is brought out in such a way that Bhaviveka accepts the distinction between veridical and non-veridical conventional truths in relation to objects but not in relation to the subjects because the subjects are consciousness and consciousnesses are, by their very nature, intrinsically real, seems to be the suggestion.

In any case, Tsongkhapa takes that as yet another instance pointing towards some kind of realism and says that the distinction between the veridical and non-veridical conventional truths cannot be grounded objectively. They need to be grounded only from the perspective of the everyday practice of the world. The perception of water as water is valid because it can lead to the performing of the function of water, whereas the perception of mirage as water is non-veridical because it cannot help fulfill the aims of the person who is seeking water to quench thirst. Again, for Chandrakirti, the differentiation between veridical and non-veridical conventional truth is made from the subjective perspective of the conventional cognition, not grounded in objective facts in the world.

Tsongkhapa sees this instance as yet another example of Bhaviveka having some kind of commitment to realism.

The fourth and final one is something that we touched on earlier. There is a real tendency in Bhaviveka's writings, in many instances, where he is trying to specify what the terms exactly refer to. Like in the case of specifying that the term *self* refers to consciousness because consciousness is what takes rebirth and what connects to the next life. These instances where Bhaviveka is really trying to specify what exactly a term refers to indicate a commitment to some kind of realism in Bhaviveka's thoughts.

So, these are really important, careful readings of Bhaviveka and fleshing out the implications of these patterns of thinking in Bhaviveka's thought.

Tsongkhapa highlights Chandrakirti's Critique

Another important point to bear in mind when Tsongkhapa is making such substantive differentiation between the two schools is also to take how Tsongkhapa reads Chandrakirti and Chandrakirti's own point of difference between himself and Bhaviveka. In this context, there is a very important section in Chandrakirti's *Entering the Middle Way* which is chapter 6, verses 34-36.

> *[If the intrinsic characteristics of things were to arise dependently,*
> *things would come to be destroyed by denying it;*
> *emptiness would then be a cause for the destruction of things.*
> *But this is illogical, so no real entities exist. 6.34*
>
> *Thus, when such phenomena are analyzed,*
> *nothing is found as their nature apart from suchness.*
> *So the conventional truth of the everyday world*
> *should not be subjected to thorough analysis. 6.35*
>
> *In the context of suchness, certain reasoning disallows arising*
> *from self or from something other, and that same reasoning*
> *disallows them on the conventional level too.*
> *So by what means then is your arising established? 6.36]*

I'm not going to read these verses because there are translations of this, but in each of these verses, Chandrakirti throws in each case an important undesirable consequence to the standpoint that subscribes to any notion of intrinsic arising. This is a very famous part of Chandrakirti's text.

The first consequence is if things possess intrinsic arising then the arya's meditative equipoise realizing emptiness directly would become the cause for destruction of things because the arya's meditative realization perceives all things as devoid of intrinsic arising and if things were to possess intrinsic arising, then it would mean that the arya's meditative experiences would destroy these phenomena. That's an important consequence.

The second consequence is that if things possess intrinsic arising this means that conventional things should be able to withstand ultimate analysis because if they possess intrinsic arising then their arising should be findable when sought for through a critical inquiry. This is referred to as the consequence that conventional truths would withstand analysis. Here, I'll quickly read from this part of Tsongkhapa's commentary on this consequence from Illuminating the Intent:

> *Thus, when refuting the approach whereby, being unsatisfied with mere designations on the conventional level, one posits the facts of conventional truth on the basis of analyzing the referents of their designations, Candrakīrti objects that the facts in that*

case will become ultimately existent and that form and so on would then not be facts of conventional truth.

Je Tsongkhapa – Illuminating the Intent, p269

If the conventional truths can withstand ultimate analysis, then by default, that would mean they are not conventional truths. They are ultimate truths. So the second consequence is the fact that conventional truths could withstand ultimate analysis.

Then, the final consequence is that ultimate arising would not be negated. So, if intrinsic arising is tenable, then ultimate arising would also be tenable because intrinsic points towards objective arising on the ultimate level. These three consequences are crucial.

Chandrakirti concludes after these three consequences that therefore something like intrinsic nature has no existence on both levels of truth, on the ultimate level as well as conventional level. He is saying intrinsic nature, intrinsic arising, svalakshana, intrinsic characteristics have no existence either on the conventional level or on the ultimate level.

So, I think the point I'm trying to make here is that Tsongkhapa reads these three stanzas, where three undesirable consequences are being thrown, as all being targeted at Bhaviveka and Madhyamaka Svatantrika reading because here he says, for example, I read from his commentary in *Illuminating the Intent*:

These consequences are being thrown against someone who rejects the ultimate existence of form and so on and takes them to be conventional. Since this cannot be said of the proponents of real entities, it is very clear that the opponent here is Svātantrika Madhyamaka.

Je Tsongkhapa – Illuminating the Intent, p269

Here, Tsongkhapa is reading these three important stanzas of *Madhyamakavatara*, *Entering the Middle Way*, as targeting someone like Bhaviveka, who was a Madhyamaka interpreter who rejects ultimate existence and ultimate arising but at the same time subscribes to some notion of intrinsic arising on the conventional level and if you have that kind of position, these three consequences will follow. Tsongkhapa says that the object of the critique here is someone like Bhaviveka. So, according to Tsongkhapa's reading, Chandrakirti clearly recognizes here a substantive philosophical difference between his reading and that of Bhaviveka.

In fact, in another instance which is the opening section of Chandrakirti's commentary on Nagarjuna's *Treatise of the Middle Way*, entitled *Clear Words*, *Prasannapadā*, Chandrakirti in fact accuses Bhaviveka of not being a Madhyamaka, actually. So, that suggests Chandrakirti, at least in his mind, there is quite a substantive philosophical difference between him and Bhaviveka. I think this is an important point to bear in mind.

Similarly, in *Entering the Middle Way*, later on towards the end, when talking about the uniqueness of the perspective he has presented in his text in interpreting Nagarjuna, Chandrakirti writes in chapter 11, verse 53:

> *Just as outside this [tradition of the] Treatise,*
> *no scriptures set forth this teaching as it is,*
> *likewise the system found here is not found elsewhere.*
> *O learned ones, be sure of this fact!*
>
> *Candrakīrti - Entering the Middle Way, 11:53*

He is essentially saying that his developing a unique reading of Nagarjuna's Madhyamaka that is not found in other Madhyamaka interpreters. He is quite clear. Chandrakirti himself is quite clear that his reading or interpretation of Nagarjuna is very different from that of someone like Bhaviveka. Similarly, in his autocommentary, *Madhyamakāvatārabhasya* on *Entering the Middle Way*, he writes:

> *Therefore, those who speak of how what the Sautrantikas assert to be ultimate realities are accepted by the Madhyamaka as conventional realities do so because they fail to understand the true intent of the Treatise on the Middle Way.*
>
> *Candrakīrti - Entering the Middle Way Autocommentary*

Here he is saying that some Madhyamikas in interpreting Nagarjuna's view say that what other schools like Sautrāntika accept as ultimate realities, they accept as conventional realities in their school. Chandrakirti is saying those who say such things haven't really understood the true intent of Nagarjuna's *Treatise on the Middle Way*.

When looking at Tsongkhapa's very detailed and systematic analysis of the distinction between Svatantrika and Prasangika, it is important to go beyond thinking about Tsongkhapa faithfully reconstructing the Indian sources. Rather, to really appreciate what Tsongkhapa is doing here is quite a deep philosophical reading of these sources and contrasting them against Chandrakirti's reading and finding in Bhaviveka's own writings instances which indicate there is some kind of commitment to a version of realism.

Similarly, to see how Chandrakirti views his own interpretation of Nagarjuna to be so different from that of Bhaviveka and that the differences emerge particularly in relation to whether or not something like intrinsic arising or intrinsic characteristic or intrinsic nature can be accepted on the conventional level.

I think these are the sources and approaches in Tsongkhapa's writing that really compels him to reach the conclusion that in these two major strands of Madhyamaka representing two important interpretation lineages of Nagarjuna's Madhyamaka, there is indeed a substantive philosophical difference and therefore, Tsongkhapa argues that the Prasangika reading or view

as interpreted by Chandrakirti represents the highest or the culmination of the Madhyamaka teaching on emptiness.

In some ways, you can see this as progressive. For example, in the first turning of the wheel, there is the attempt to deconstruct the notion of permanence, notion of independent self, and autonomous self. Then moving through the cittamatra level, where there is an attempt to deconstruct the material world, and thus reject external reality. Then, when you move to Madhyamaka Svatantrika, then even the consciousness, the subjective world of experience is deconstructed, having no true existence. Even there, there is some kind of haven sought in autonomous reasoning as well as intrinsic arising and intrinsic characteristic on the conventional level. Finally, Chandrakiriti's Madhyamaka Prasangika destroys that final haven of grounding some kind of objective existence. That's one way of reading the development of Chandrakirti's Madhyamaka Prasangika according to Tsongkhapa. This, I think, is an important point to bear in mind.

Conclusion and Key Points

To conclude, Tsongkhapa's allegations against Svatantrikas, especially Bhaviveka, are based on two things. First, there are important instances in their writings to suggest a kind of residue of realism and second is Chandrakirti's critique of Bhaviveka, especially Chandrakirti's critique of autonomous syllogism and Bhaviveka's attempts to specify exactly the referents of terms.

In contemporary language, what Tsongkhapa is saying on behalf of Chandrakirti is that Bhaviveka and his followers like Jnanagarbha and Shantarakshita, because of their enthusiasm for and commitment to Dignaga and Dharmakirti's epistemology which is tied to a foundationalist ontology, which also sort of influences them to specify exact referents of the terms, therefore, even these Madhyamaka masters end up somehow committing to some kind of residual realism.

Therefore, in his writings Tsongkhapa sees a sharp divide between Prasangika's perspective on reality versus the rest of all Buddhist schools. In fact he uses the phrase Prasangika view and the view of Buddhist schools including Svatantrika Madhyamaka. He really sees a sharp contrast, a point of departure between these two. When we look at this important debate on the distinction between Svatantrika and Madhyamaka Prasangika, regardless of the historicity of the actual emergence of schools in India, I think taking Tsongkhapa seriously in his attempt to read deeply into the philosophical implications of the patterns of thinking that emerge in Bhaviveka's writings and contrasting it with Chandrakirti's Prasangika Madhyamaka is a really helpful approach.

This is aimed at helping us inquire ever deeper into our own layers of grasping and deconstructing the reification that we have put in place so that in the end we let go of any attempt to seek objective grounding to the reality of our lived experience so that no logic, no reason, and nothing objectively tenable has a grounding of the reality of our experience. This way of looking at this subtle debate in the form of a progressive ever-refining of this

understanding of how to understand emptiness and the teaching of emptiness is a helpful way of appreciating the point of departure between these two schools so that it does not become purely an exercise at historical reconstruction or an intellectual exercise of differentiating just what the different views are.

Actually, Tsongkhapa's writings both in the insight section of the *Great Treatise* as well as *Essence of Eloquence* is really aimed at relating all of these subtle distinctions to our own personal practice, in relation to our own experience of forms of grasping that can get ever subtler. I think that way of peeling off layers and layers and, of course eventually the layers get thinner, so differentiations become harder, but still it is a worthwhile project and ever getting finer in our analysis so that we recognize any attempts on our path to seek grounding objectively which can become a haven for belief in intrinsic existence.

Therefore, this differentiation between the Svatantrika and Prasangika, this whole debate may seem quite academic and like an intellectual and philosophical exercise, but it has real implications for our own personal practice as well.

Before I conclude, I would like to draw attention to a very important book that came out which is a compilation of papers on this very topic, *The Svatantrika-Prasangika Distinction*. The subtitle is *What Difference does a Difference Make*? I think it was edited by Sara McClintock and George Dreyfus and for those who are interested in getting deeper into this debate in the Tibetan tradition as a whole, but more specifically into Tsongkhapa's deep reading and his understanding of the difference, looking at some of the key contributions in that volume could really help you deepen your understanding as well.

Let me conclude by identifying the key points of this class.

- The dispute between Bhaviveka and Chandrakirti pertaining to their different methodology is not simply about a difference of methodological approach. It points to an underlying philosophical difference that is substantive. This is an important point from Tsongkhapa's point of view.

- Various elements in Bhaviveka's views, his insistence on autonomous syllogism, his insistence to specify the referents of conventional terms, his criticism of cittamatra's refutation of imputed phenomena as being nihilistic, and so on, suggests a form of residual realism on the part of Bhaviveka.

- Especially Chandrakirti's objection in *Entering the Middle Way*, where he levels three unwanted consequences to adhering to the notion of intrinsic characteristics is, according to Tsongkhapa, aimed at Bhaviveka's brand of Madhyamaka.

- Hence the key philosophical difference between the two Madhyamaka camps is Svatantrika's acceptance of intrinsic characteristics at least on the conventional level while Prasangika rejects it on the level of both truths, ultimate as well as conventional.

One of the important points that emerges in this whole discussion is a topic we touched upon in the last class which is the status of the conventional truth according to Madhyamaka. Chandrakirti and Tsongkhapa are particularly focused on articulating, outlining, what is the status of that conventional truth and how do we draw the fine line. But the one very important point Chandrakirti brings up is when it comes to the actual status of what that conventional truth is, he says it is not the philosopher's task to specify the criteria of that conventional existence. He says philosophers should defer to the world and accept the world's own terms for the existence of what is true and what is false.

Philosophers should not be in the business of telling what exists. The philosopher's role is to specify in what sense things do exist. How can we understand the nature of phenomena? The philosopher's task is not to tell the world what exists and what does not exist. As to what exactly is the status of that existence, Chandrakirti says we should ask the world, not the philosophers.

In other words, this echoes a statement attributed to the Buddha, also found in Theravada scriptures and which I cited in one of the early classes where the Buddha says, "It is not me who disputes with the world. Whatever the world says exists, I accept. Whatever the world says does not exist, I do not accept its existence." There's a kind of deference to the world when it comes to conventional truth.

Tsongkhapa and Chandrakirti are saying philosophers like Bhaviveka, although they pay lip service to phrases like conventional existence, conventional existence has to be understood within the boundary of conventional truth, but because they are attempting to specify exactly what the conventional terms refer to, in a sense, they are going beyond what the world posits. I think this is here a question of boundary. Chandrakirti and Tsongkhapa are very committed to finding out where the boundary lies so we don't slide into a form of analysis that goes beyond the framework of conventional truth.

I think those are important points and also some of the points are quite subtle. When thinking about the Svatantrika Prasangika distinction which is the topic of this class, we should not think in isolation. We should also think in the broader context of the overall Madhyamaka attempt to understand reality or existence in the wake of the negation of emptiness.

Thank you.

Verses for Meditation Practice

Opening: settling the mind practice

Material form is merely a label;
space too is a mere label.
Without the elements how can there be matter?

Therefore, what is merely a label too is the same.
—Precious Garland, 1.99

གཟུགས་ཀྱི་དངོས་པོ་མེད་ཙམ་སྟེ། །ཞམ་མཁའ་ཡང་ནི་མེད་ཙམ་མོ།།
འཇུང་མེད་གཟུགས་རྣ་གཡ་ཞེག །དེ་ཕྱིར་མེད་ཙམ་དེ་བཞིན་ནོ།།

“mere label,” (མིང་ཙམ་)
“mere designation,” (བརྗོད་ཙམ་)
“mere imputation,” (བཏགས་ཙམ་)
“mere conceptual imputation,” (རྟོག་པས་བཏགས་ཙམ་)
“mere construct” (བཅོས་ཙམ་)
“mere label and nominally real” (མིང་ཙམ་བཏགས་ཡོད་)

What does this operative word “mere” exclude? Objective existence.

The chariot analogy:

The parts, qualities, attachment, defining characteristics, fuel and so on,
the whole, quality-bearer, object of attachment, the characterized, fire and so on,
none of these exist when subjected to sevenfold chariot analysis.
Yet they exist in another way, through everyday conventions of the world.
–MA, 6.167

ཡོན་ཏན་ཡན་ལག་འདོད་ཆགས་མཚན་ཉིད་དང་ནི་བྱང་ཤིང་ལ་སོགས་དང་། །ཡོན་ཏན་ཅན་ཡན་ལག་ཅན་ཆགས་དང་མཚན་གཞི་མེ་ལ་སོགས་དོན་དག
།དེ་རྣམས་ཤིང་རྟའི་རྣམ་དཔྱད་བྱས་པས་རྣམ་བདུན་ཡོད་པ་མ་ཡིན་ཞིང་། །དེ་ལས་གཞན་དུ་ཐྲུར་པ་འཇིག་རྟེན་གྲགས་པའི་སྒོ་ནས་ཡོད་པ་ཡིན།།

8 – Unique Tenets of Prāsaṅgika According to Tsongkhapa

11/11/2022

Welcome to lesson eight. This lesson is on Prasangika unique tenets according to Tsongkhapa. In the previous lesson seven, we focused on the important topic of the distinction between Svatantrika and Prasangika Madhyamaka and particularly how Tsongkhapa understands the point of differences between the two strands of Madhyamaka interpretation and Tsongkhapa's substantive claim that Madhyamaka Svatantrika, particularly Bhaviveka's writings demonstrate, by citing certain instances, some kind of commitment to residual realism and how Prasangika perspective really represents the final elimination of possible havens for grounding objective reality.

In this class, we will focus on another important aspect of Tsongkhapa's Madhyamaka which is referred to as the Unique Tenets of the Prasangika system. Tsongkhapa is famous for this and, in fact, some of the later Tibetan Madhyamaka thinkers criticized Tsongkhapa for even suggesting that Madhyamaka Prasangika has unique tenets of its own, let alone having tenets.

However, when relating to Tsongkhapa's assertions about their being unique tenets to Madhyamaka Prasangika system, such as that of Chandrakirti, it is important to understand that Tsongkhapa is not really saying that Madhyamaka Prasangika masters like Chandrakirti and Buddhapalita, and he includes the example of Shantideva in that camp as well, he's not saying that the Madhyamaka Prasangikas are out there to distinguish or differentiate themselves and consciously formulating distinct tenets of their own so that they emerge as a distinct philosophical school within the Indian Buddhist tradition.

What Tsongkhapa is saying is that given that Madhyamaka Prasangika's reading of Nagarjuna is quite unique and actually way more advanced than that of Svatantrikas, such as Bhaviveka, and at the core of which is the denial or rejection of any notion of intrinsic nature or intrinsic arising or intrinsic characteristics, svalakshana, svabhāva, even on the conventional level, let alone ultimate level, this radical assertion of the negation of absence of intrinsic nature and intrinsic characteristic even on the conventional level has certain implications that points towards views of Prasangika on important domains of Buddhist thought which turns out to be quite unique. It's a subtle distinction but it is important to make that distinction.

Tsongkhapa is not saying that Chandrakirti is interested in going out to set out his own unique positions of his own and tenets. He is basically saying that given Chandrakirti's central commitment to rejecting the notion of intrinsic nature and intrinsic characteristics, svalakshana, even at the conventional level, there emerge tenets and views in relation to other areas of Buddhist thought that are unique to Prasangika. That, I think, is a really important point.

In other words, this is part of Tsongkhapa's attempt to flesh out the wider and deeper implications of Prasangika's view and denial of intrinsic arising and svalakshana. We know already, for example, from Chandrakirti's own *Entering the Middle Way*, in chapter 6 there are

explicit refutations of the cittamatra standpoint, the mind-only standpoint. The cittamatra's rejection of external reality is a very important focus of critique for him and Chandrakirti explicitly points out that from his point of view, there is no problem in accepting external reality on the conventional level, on the same status as subjective experience of consciousness. He even says that there is no point in discriminating between the objective world of matter, material phenomena, versus subjective world of experience and consciousness with respect to their existential status. Insofar as ultimate existence is concerned, both of them are rejected and insofar as the conventional existence is concerned, just as the subjective world of experience and consciousness has existence, similarly, the external reality too must be accepted. They are on equal par, there is no basis for discriminating between the two in terms of their hierarchy of existence. That's very explicit.

Similarly, in *Entering the Middle Way*, Chandrakirti explicitly critiques the cittamatra notion of foundational consciousness, alayavijnana, which cittamatra presents as the repository of karmic imprints and many of the imprints of the perceptual experiences. They see foundational consciousness as the source from which emerges the entire perception of the world. Again, there is explicit critique of that.

Similarly, in *Entering the Middle Way*, in critiquing cittamatra's proof of what they claim to be intrinsic reality of dependent phenomena, particularly consciousness, the proof they present is the notion of reflexive awareness, the reflexive character of consciousness. Here Chandrakirti explicitly critiques reflexive awareness and comes up with his own explanation that accounts for the phenomenon of memory.

Similarly, in the autocommentary in chapter 1, Chandrakirti explicitly talks about how given that the difference between selflessness of person and selflessness of phenomena must be understood not in terms of the subtlety of what is being negated, the notion of selfhood, but rather on the basis of the differences in the subject upon which the selflessness is being understood. So, selflessness understood in relation to person is the selflessness of person, and selflessness understood in relation to phenomena is the selflessness of phenomena and there is no difference of subtlety between the two. In relation to that, therefore, Chandrakirti says that unlike Bhaviveka, he accepts that even shravakas and pratyekabuddhas, not just bodhisattvas, also have realization of the selflessness of phenomena. That was an important point of difference between Chandrakirti and Bhaviveka that he explicitly says.

So, we see in Chandrakirti's own writing very explicit statements in specific areas of Buddhist thought where he is presenting his own view. It is these that Tsongkhapa is fleshing out as representing unique tenets of a Prasangika system. That's an important point to keep in mind.

Tsongkhapa's Famous Eight Unique Points of Prasangika

In relation to this, Tsongkhapa is famous for presenting a list of eight unique tenets of Prasangika Madhyamaka, but sometimes even Gelug interpreters of Tsongkhapa do not fully appreciate the numbering that he presents, listing the eight. He did not mean the list of eight to

be exhaustive. He meant the list to be illustrative and identifying initially the eight important ones. That is important because sometimes people read Tsongkhapa as saying that he lists only eight unique tenets of Prasangika. In fact, here let me read from Tsongkhapa's own statement as an opening to his listing of the eight. This is from *Illuminating the Intent* in chapter 6. He says:

> *From the traditions of interpreting the treatises of the noble Nāgārjuna comes this unique interpretation, whereby one can still posit all effective transactions [of the world] even though not even the tiniest particle of intrinsic reality exists. Based on this approach, many perfect tenets emerge that are unique compared to other commentators <here, talking about commentators on Nagarjuna>. What are these tenets? For now, here are the principal ones:*
>
> 1. *Rejecting a foundation consciousness that is separate from the sixfold classes of consciousness*
> 2. *A unique method of refuting reflexive awareness (self-cognition)*
> 3. *Rejecting the use of autonomous syllogism to engender the view of suchness in others; thus three rejections.*
> 4. *Accepting external reality's existence to the same extent as one accepts the existence of consciousness <there is a parity>*
> 5. *Accepting that even śrāvakas and pratyekabuddhas realize the selflessness of phenomena*
> 6. *Accepting that grasping at the self-existence of phenomena is a form of affliction*
> 7. *Accepting that the disintegration [of things] is a conditioned thing*
> 8. *Because of this reason, accepting a unique way of defining the three times.*
>
> *Je Tsongkhapa – Illuminating the Intent, p276*

So, [regarding point 8] there is a concept of temporal stages of past, present, and future that is, in Tsongkhapa's understanding, unique to Prasangika view.

This list should not be confused with another list of eight that emerges in Tsongkhapa's writing, an important text called *Memorandum on Eight Difficult Points of Nagarjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, Treatise on the Middle Way*. This is notes of a lecture compiled by Tsongkhapa's principal student and disciple Gyaltsab Je. In this text, there is a list of eight, slightly different. They overlap, but it's slightly different. This list contains four sets of negations / rejections, and four sets of acceptances.

> *Four negative tenets:*
> 1. *Rejection of the notion of intrinsic characteristics even on the conventional level*
> 2. *Rejection of foundation consciousness*
> 3. *Rejection of autonomous syllogism*
> 4. *Rejection of reflexive awareness*
>
> *Four positive tenets:*

5. *Acceptance of external reality <contrary to cittamatra position>*
6. *Accepting that shravakas and pratyekabuddhas realize selflessness of phenomena*
7. *Unique understanding of the nature of the two obscurations*
8. *Unique explanation of the way a buddha's gnosis perceives the world*

Je Tsongkhapa – Memorandum on Eight Difficult Points

You can see that the list overlaps but there are some items on one list and some items are not on the other list. In any case, the point is that we should not confuse the two sets of lists which are slightly different. In the context of this course, we are focusing on the first list, which is the one that is famous coming from his own *Illuminating the Intent*. I want to once again reiterate the point that this should not be seen as exhaustive. Tsongkhapa is only presenting an illustration and that point is made powerfully clear from his phraseology when he says, "What are these tenets? *For now*, here are the principal ones…"

I'm not going to go into each of the eight unique tenets one-by-one. We wouldn't have the time to go through these and also, some of these are quite explicitly accessible in the translations that we've provided and the reading list will provide them with their corresponding sections of Tsongkhapa's text and Chandrakirti's writing as well.

In this class, I would like to focus on three of the key unique tenets. (1) Refutation of foundation consciousness, alaya, the store consciousness. (2) Refutation of reflexive awareness, which I think is an important one. Both of these are important concepts of cittamatra Yogachara philosophy and both of these are really important ontologically speaking from the Yogachara point of view in relation with the first, and epistemologically speaking in relation to the second because this is the epistemological grounding of Yogachara's key tenet of asserting intrinsic existence of consciousness. Finally, we will look at another unique tenet which has been an object of criticism of Tsongkhapa's thought, (3) the suggestion that even the disintegration of phenomena is a kind of conditioned thing. Those are three tenets we will look into more specifically.

Critique of Foundation Consciousness

This is one of the central ideas of cittamatra ontology because it is primarily a mentalistic philosophy which rejects ultimately the reality to external world of matter. There is a whole ontology based on this idea of our perception of the world emerging from this very fundamental level of conscious reality, which is this store consciousness, a repository of all the seeds of our experience and from which emerges, unfolds the whole perception. Then, the world of diversity that we experience in the form of objective world out there are, in some sense, expressions or reflections coming out of these perceptions that we experience and the external world is sometimes referred to as percepts, rnam rig, concepts or percepts. That, I think, is a very important foundational concept of cittamatra, Mind-only school.

The cittamatra mind-only school, one of the most important sources for that concept of foundational consciousness is Asanga's *Summary of the Great Vehicle*, *Mahāyānasaṃgraha*. If you look at the Yogachara sources which Tsongkhapa brings up in his presentation in *Illuminating the Intent,* they show that this foundational consciousness is supposed to be morally neutral, so it's neither virtuous nor non-virtuous, it is morally speaking neutral. Its object includes the world of everyday experience, but it is a passive state of consciousness. Phenomena appear to it, but it has no activity of cognition, so it's a passive state because it is so fundamental. It's almost like the ground of being.

Also, it is cognitively speaking a very minimalist state. Only the five omnipresent factors accompany it—feeling, perception, intention, contact, and then attention. These are five omnipresent mental factors which are supposed to be present in any mental event. This is the very minimal activity of mental experience present there. It is a repository of all karmic imprints. This is a storage place, therefore, sometimes in translations alaya is translated as store-consciousness, foundational consciousness. So, alaya literally means the basis-of-all. It's a repository of all karmic imprints as well as all experiences that are imprinted by perception. There is this idea that every single experience leaves an imprint upon consciousness and the imprints will later come into contact with conditions and then mature in the form of another experience.

It's not just a repository of the karmic seeds, but also it's the repository of all the traces of experiences that we have. Finally, this consciousness, which is the very basic underlying reality of our mental experience is understood to be the object of "I am." When we experience a sense of "I am" the "I" refers to that store consciousness. It is the object of "I am" and the real referent of the term *person* and *self*. The term person and self, when you search for their true referent, what you find is this foundational consciousness.

You can see that it is a very rich concept and it also plays a very important role, and by the way, foundational consciousness is also what transmigrates. All the other mental consciousnesses and sensory activities come to cease, but foundational consciousness never ceases and that's what connects to the next life. It is a very rich concept.

From Chandrakirti's point of view, this concept is hugely problematic. First of all, for Chandrakirti, the first and foremost and biggest problem is that kind of concept is postulated going way beyond analysis of the conventional level of reality. In other words, the concept of foundational consciousness, from Chandrakirti's point of view, is posited from the perspective of searching for ultimate reality. It's going beyond the framework of worldly convention. Foundational consciousness, even if it exists, cannot be considered a conventional truth because conventional truth requires its reality to be understood within the framework of worldly practice and worldly transactions.

Secondly, foundational consciousness really borders on [being] a kind of atman-like entity. The only difference is that it is considered to be a conditioned phenomena that changes every moment because of being Buddhist. Other than that it has all the attributes of an atman-like

[thing] in principle. In fact, historically, the cittamatrins were accused of bringing atman through the back door. The cittamatra defense is that atman is eternal and permanent and our foundational consciousness is conditioned phenomena. That's the only difference they could point to, but again, for someone like Chandrakirti, it is really problematic. It is really bringing an atman-like entity. Because the cittamatrins understand it to be so fundamental, that they attribute such a minimal level of cognitive activity it almost becomes like an irreducible primitive that exists on its own in its own right.

Thirdly, from Chandrakirti's point of view, even from a practical point of view, he feels that there is no need to posit some kind of hugely problematic metaphysical concept because in the end, one of the important principles that is so important for Buddhism is in Western philosophy known as the Occam's Razor principle. You don't postulate something unless it is absolutely necessary. Any postulations you make have to have explanatory power. If a certain metaphysical concept is presented and proposed, but it has no extra explanatory power, then there is no point in making that supposition.

Buddhists tend to be quite minimalist. That's why Buddhism does not accept god because the evolution of the cosmos can be explained without resorting to a belief in external transcendental creator. The evolution of the cosmos, both of the external world as well as the sentient beings within it, can be accounted for purely within the framework of cause and conditions. Hence, mere conditionedness—this coming from that. So, Buddhism rejects the notion of a transcendental creator.

Similarly, Buddhism rejects the notion of atman because you can account for all the phenomenal facts of experience—continuity of the person, memory, identity of the person, all of these—without presupposing an enduring eternal unitary principle called atman. Again, Buddhism is minimalist. You don't speculate or come up with an unnecessary metaphysical construct unless it has extra explanatory power.

Chandrakirti is saying that there is no need to come up with such a metaphysical concept because one of the main purposes of postulating this is to explain the continuity of karmic causation. Chandrakirti is saying in order for karmic causation to be explained where in a previous life you commit a certain karmic act and a few lives later you experience the consequence of that and what keeps the connection between the effect felt several lives later versus the cause that was created several lives previously, cittamatrins try to link this through the presence of the continuation of foundational consciousness as the repository of that karma that has been kept. It's like a bank that keeps the security of that money.

Chandrakirti is saying you don't really need that kind of postulation because a simple fact that certain actions give rise to certain consequences is accepted on the conventional level, so you don't really need to postulate that kind of hugely problematic metaphysical construct to be able to explain karmic causation.

In *Entering the Middle Way*, Chandrakirti simply says that because when a karmic act was done and the karmic act ceases in the immediate aftermath, because a karmic act is an event and events don't last long. An event takes place and comes to cease, but that ceasing is not intrinsic ceasing. That ceasing is part of the conventional cause and effect process.

Because no intrinsic cessation has taken place, the karmic potential has not gone out of total existence. If that cessation was intrinsic, inherent, and absolute, then karmic potential would have been totally lost. Because that cessation was conventional, only part of a conventional cause and effect process, then there is no reason why the karmic potential would be lost. Therefore, when a few lives later an effect is experienced, there is no need to link the two by positing something that has an enduring quality.

This unique way of critiquing the foundational consciousness is a really important part of Chandrakirti's philosophy. In fact, a large part of chapter six in *Entering the Middle Way* is devoted to the critique of a cittamatra viewpoint.

Critique of Reflexive Awareness

The second important critique of cittamatra is the critique of reflexive awareness, svasamvedena in Sanskrit and rang rig in Tibetan. Rang rig is a very interesting epistemological concept that we see in Yogachara and also Svatantrika philosophy as well. In order to capture what exactly is the notion of reflexive awareness, let me read from Tsongkhapa's *Illuminating the Intent*, his commentary on Chandrakirti where before critiquing it, what is being critiqued is explained, defined.

> *Subscribing to the Sautrāntika view, some—that is, Cittamātra—present the following to prove reflexive awareness. The instant a flame appears, it simultaneously illuminates both itself as well as objects such as a vase; it does not illuminate these sequentially. Similarly, when one utters the word "vase," it engenders [awareness of] both the sound of the word and the vase that is the referent of that word. Consciousness too, when it arises, is aware of both itself as well as its object; it does not become aware of the two in sequence. Therefore reflexive awareness is something that definitely exists. So they claim.*
>
> *Furthermore, they assert, even those who do not yet accept reflexive awareness will have no choice but to admit its existence. For if one does not accept it, there can be no subsequent recollection of an object in terms of "I have seen <u>this</u>" or recollection of the subjective experience of seeing that object in terms of "<u>I</u> have seen this." Why is this so? It is impossible to have a recollection of something that has not been experienced. Remembering is thus a subjective experience that has as its object something that was previously experienced. According to you who deny reflexive awareness, they say, since the previous cognition such as the perception of a blue object was never experienced in its own time, there can be no subsequent recollection of it.*

Je Tsongkhapa – Illuminating the Intent, p340

This is quite an important concept in Sautrantika and Cittamatra view and one of the major proponents of this view was the 5th century epistemologist and logician, Dignana, who states in fact consciousness has as part of its constitutive element, three aspects: (1) Pure subjectivity—consciousness is a felt state of mind. (2) Intentionality which is an object focus, object orientation. What is being perceived, its content. (3) Subject orientation, a sort of a self-revelation, its own awareness of itself.

Consciousness always has these dual aspects of object orientation and subjective orientation. Just as Tsongkhapa cites here the example of a flame which lights the object as well as itself and it doesn't do this in sequence. The word vase brings about awareness of both the sound of the word, which is vase, as well as the [object] vase it is pointing at. So, their argument is that there is something to the character of subjective experience, such as consciousness, that has this inward aspect.

In other words, this is from Tsongkhapa's *Illuminating the Intent*, when he defines reflexive awareness according to those who propose, he writes:

> *… an inward-directed cognition that is free of all dualistic perceptions and is self-cognizing. They maintain that, though self-cognizing, there is no dualistic perception of knower and the known involved within such cognition.*

Je Tsongkhapa – Illuminating the Intent, p339

This is a really subtle concept but it's an important one. There is an inward dimension which is a self-illumination, but this self-illumination is non-thematic. It does not have a knower and known duality. It is a nondual way of knowing itself. The key argument they present is that if you don't posit something like this reflexive awareness, then you don't have a way to account for the subsequent memory of the subjective experience because memory presupposes prior experience. You can only say, I remember x, y, and z," if you have seen that before, if you have known that before.

Just as we recognize a flower that we have seen yesterday and when we see it, we say, "Oh, I saw this yesterday," which points towards a prior experience, in the same way, when you say, "I have seen this flower yesterday," with the subjective force of *you* having seen it, it was *you* who saw it, then there is a subjective dimension to the memory as well, not just the memory of the object seen, but also the memory of the subject experienced. So, their claim is that just as the memory of the object requires the prior perception of the object, similarly, memory of the subjective experience requires a prior perception of the subjective experience. Therefore, when the object was perceived, like the blue flower, at that very moment, there must have been a dimension of that experience that was perceiving itself.

That is an important argument that the proponents of reflexive awareness present. More importantly, from Chandrakirti's point of view, the reason why reflexive awareness needs to be critiqued is because Chandrakirti sees cittamatra's use of reflexive awareness as a way of proof, evidence, for the intrinsic reality of consciousness. Chandrakirti understands this important role the reflexive awareness is playing, not just as an epistemological concept, but actually underpinning a certain ontology of the intrinsic existence of consciousness, which Chandrakirti wants to critique.

Therefore, when he refutes the reflexive awareness, he begins in the following way in his Entering the Middle Way:

> *Now if this entity dependent nature—*
> *free of duality and devoid of object and of subject—exists,*
> *by what means is its existence known?*
> *Without observing it, you cannot say it exists.*
>
> *Candrakīrti - Entering the Middle Way, 6:72*

Dependent nature in cittamatra refers to conditioned phenomena but more importantly, to consciousness because remember, ultimately, cittamatrins reject external reality of matter. For them, dependent nature ultimately is a conscious subjective experience. He goes on to say that cognition that is aware of itself is not established.

He is saying if you say this dependent nature, which is the consciousness that is nondual and free of duality of subject and object, exists because it is known through reflexive awareness, it is known by itself, then Chandrakirti says that the idea that cognition is aware of itself is not established. Then, there's a long critique of this and Chandrakirti's critique involves two things: (1) demonstrating logically the untenability of the idea of self-cognition because self-cognition suggests an activity of cognition where there is no action, there is no activity. That's a critique of the untenability of that concept. Then, the second part of Chandrakirti's critique is (2) to present an alternative explanation that accounts for the phenomena of memory without needing to resort to this postulation of self-awareness or reflexive awareness.

In demonstrating the untenability of the concept of self-cognition, Chandrakirti cites an important stanza from the Lankavatara sutra. The sutra says:

> *Just as the blade of a sword*
> *does not cut itself, and just as*
> *the tip of a nail does not touch itself,*
> *so is the case with the mind viewing itself.*
>
> *Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra*

The Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra says the mind viewing itself is impossible because it's just like saying the blade of a sword cuts itself or the tip of a nail touches itself. The point Chandrakirti is making is that in some ways, the notion of awareness that is embedded in self-cognition really violates the worldly conventions of the concept of cognizing, the concept of knowing. In a worldly convention, when we say, "Such and such knows something," there is a knower and a known and the activity of knowing. In self-cognition, because it is supposed to be nondual, there is no knower and known distinction to be made, then there is no way in which one can justifiably attribute the activity of knowing. It is almost like asking to imagine a blade of a sword cutting itself.

Of course, some level of reflexive awareness is something that even Chandrakirti will have to admit, self-knowledge. But, for Chandrakirti, the problematic concept is the idea that every moment of cognition knows itself. That's a problem. You can attribute self-awareness based on a continuum of a person's experience—subsequent knowledge referring back to previous experience. But if you claim that every single moment of cognition, by its very nature, is aware of itself, this is a problematic concept for Chandrakirti.

In any case, basically, for Chandrakirti, this concept again points towards some kind of primitive irreducible ultimate absolute existence. It is supposed to be undefiled, it is supposed to be nondual, it is supposed to have intrinsic reality, then how does that differ from something like atman? The only thing is it is not a basis of personal identity. So, again for Chandrakirti that's a problem because it really is veering towards seeking some kind of basic building block that has intrinsic reality.

The second part of Chandrakirti's strategy is to provide an alternative explanation that accounts for the phenomenon of memory because remember that the key argument that the Cittamātrins and Sautrāntikas use for the presence of self-cognition is that just as the recollection of the object presupposes prior perception of the object, in the same way, recollection of the subject must presuppose a prior perception of the subject.

Here, Chandrakirti and especially Tsongkhapa goes into a lot of detail which I'm not going to go into here. He looks into different instances of recollection. Sometimes your recollection can take the form of very emphatic saying, "I myself saw this yesterday," and this, "This is the same thing that I saw yesterday." Sometimes the recollection takes the form where the emphasis is really on the object seen and sometimes recollection takes the form where the emphasis is really on the subjective person who has seen it. You yourself has seen is.

But the point Chandrakirti and Tsongkhapa makes is that in any instance of recollection, the recollection always takes the form of a first person's perspective. I cannot have a recollection of your perception, your experience. Recollection, by its very nature and definition, is always in the first person perspective, so the recollection of the subjective experience is part and parcel of the recollection of the object that was perceived before. Chandrakirti and Tsongkhapa remind us that there is, in fact, phenomenologically speaking, as you experience a recollection of something, that recollection of your having experienced that comes as part of that memory

of the object seen. They don't separate these. Therefore, when an object was perceived, there is no need for a separate stream of consciousness perceiving itself, perceiving the subject.

Their argument is that the very nature of memory, of the experience, because it is from a first person perspective and first person subjective experience, the memory will also take the form of a first person subjective experience. So, the memory of subject and memory of object are fused together inseparably. There is no need for a separate stream of cognition to account for the memory of the subjective side.

It is a subtle explanation, but it's an important one. They are relating to the phenomenology and the reason why is because they say both the perception and the subsequent recollection relate to the same object. When you say, "I saw this flower yesterday," both the prior perception and the subsequent memory are relating to the flower that you are now remembering having seen. Both the prior perception and the subsequent recollection relates to the same object and both of these, memory as well as the prior perception, belong to the same continuum of the person. It does not belong to two separate streams of consciousness of two different people.

Thirdly, they say that in worldly convention too, the recollection of the object satisfies the explanation for the recollection of the subjective experience, so there is no need for a separate stream. In these ways, Chandrakirti explains that you don't really need to postulate a problematic concept like reflexive awareness in order to account for the phenomenon of memory. You can give a coherent account for the phenomenon of memory and Tsongkhapa particularly cites in this context something from Shantideva's ninth chapter in *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way* which has, like Chandrakirti, a very extensive and sustained critique of cittamatra view in Shantideva's text.

There is a memorable analogy given in chapter nine verse 23 and I'll read this:

> *[Opponent:] If there is no self-cognition,*
> *how is consciousness remembered?*
> *[Shantideva:] Memory comes with the connection to*
> *another experience, as with the shrew's poison.*
>
> *Shantideva - A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life [9:23]*

Shantideva is referring to a mole-like mammal who hibernates during winter and it gets bitten during winter and that biting causes poisoning. But when the animal was bitten, the animal remembers being bitten but does not remember being poisoned so when the animal remembers being poisoned, it will then remember, "I was poisoned at the time I was bitten." This is an interesting analogy, I don't know what the animal looks like, but this is in Shantideva's *Guide to the Bodhisattva Way*. The point that Shantideva is making is that you don't need a separate stream to account for the ability to recollect the subjective experience. The very thing that gave rise to the recollection of the object itself does the job. You don't need a separate

stream. That, I think, is a really important point that both Chandrakirti and Shantideva are making, but more importantly for Chandrakirti, the problem with the reflexive awareness is it really borders towards postulating some kind of indivisible primitive objectively real entity that becomes yet another object to be grasped at. Although, for the Sautrantika, it plays a more important role from an epistemological account of our experience, but in cittamatra, they also use it as a way of grounding their ontology of the intrinsic existence of consciousness, which for Chandrakirti is the bigger problem. Therefore, Tsongkhapa really sees Chandrakirti's critique of reflexive awareness as a unique tenet, a unique way in which the critique is presented.

Acceptance of Disintegratedness as a Conditioned Phenomenon

The third unique tenet I want to touch upon is the acceptance of the disintegration as a conditioned phenomenon. This is a much more difficult concept and actually, quite an obscure one to be honest. This is a dense one so I would like to read quite a chunk from Tsongkhapa's own writing to get a clearer sense of what is going on here. The idea itself is quite simple because when an event takes place, events are momentary and come to cease. When an event comes to cease, that cessation is an act. Similarly when things emerge from causes and conditions, at a certain point things will break and come to cease and that cessation is an act.

In traditional Buddhism, in other Buddhist schools, characteristics of conditioned phenomena like arising, ceasing, enduring, are seen as impermanent, seen as part of the conditioned characteristic, but the ceased result, cessation itself is understood to be unconditioned. Cessation is understood in terms of total nonexistence. They make a distinction between ceasing as a conditioned act and cessation as an unconditioned phenomenon.

Chandrakirti rejects that and wants to say that just as the present activity of ceasing is impermanent and a conditioned event, in the same way, the result of that, which is the act of cessation having ceased should also be considered a conditioned phenomenon because it is the result of an event, the result of a cause.

This is quite a complex discussion and the implication for Tsongkhapa reading Chandrakirti is that this then opens up the appreciation that Prasangika has a unique view on the nature of the three times, past, present, and future. Just as the present moment is a conditioned event, so is past and future. For Prasangika, the three stages of time are all equally conditioned phenomena, whereas for other Buddhist schools, Sautrantika, Yogachara, and all of them, past and future are considered to be unconditioned and only the present is real. Chandrakirti does not want to endorse that kind of discrimination and give more intrinsic reality to the present. That's one of the reasons why this becomes an important issue.

Let me read this from *Illuminating the Intent*:

> In *Clear Words* Candrakīrti presents both scriptural citations and reasoned arguments to prove this. The first refers to the statement in the *Ten Grounds Sutra* that "Conditioned by birth, aging and death come about." "Death" refers to the disintegration of a sentient

being, and this, the sutra states, is produced in dependence on birth. The same sutra also says:

> Dying consists of two activities: it involves disintegration of karmic activity, and it brings forth the cause that ensures uninterrupted continuity of ignorance.

Tsongkhapa is here citing a sutra which says that dying has two activities, one is to bring about the end of the karmic activity of this present life and then the second is that death is what connects to the next life, uninterrupted continuity of ignorance into the next life. I continue to quote here:

> The sutra states that dying performs two functions: it makes death a caused event, and it perpetuates ignorance. Disintegration is produced by a cause, and disintegration thereby also has the capacity to produce effects. Although the disintegration referred to here is that of a continuum, the same is also true of momentary disintegration, where the first moment disintegrates at the time of the second moment. So this [sutra citation] also indicates how the first moment is the cause of its own disintegration in the second moment. Therefore, whether it is between a sentient being's birth and death or between a momentary phenomenon's not persisting at the time of its second moment and not having persisted at the time of its second moment, they are entirely equal in whether they can be considered conditioned things and whether they are produced by their causes. […]
>
> Now, since the disintegration of the first moment at the time of the second moment is something that must be cognized by means of an explicit elimination of its object of negation, it is a form of negation; and, furthermore, since it is not a nonimplicative negation, it is an implicative negation. This is because it has not simply eliminated a thing that has become disintegrated; it also implies, in the course of its negation, some other conditioned thing. As for more details on the remaining parts of the reasoning proving [disintegration to be a conditioned thing], you could learn these from my commentary on Fundamental Wisdom. This reasoning [on disintegration] represents a form of reasoning that is most subtle and an important feature of Candrakīrti's tradition.
>
> *Je Tsongkhapa – Illuminating the Intent*

In Tsongkhapa's commentary, entitled *Ocean of Reasoning*, on Nagarjuna's Fundamental Wisdom, he really presents in quite a detailed way the arguments from Chandrakirti on making the point that just as disintegrating is conditioned and caused, disintegration itself should also be considered a conditioned phenomenon and [something that is] caused. In the end, he really sees disintegration as a past action, past event, and therefore, just as present is conditioned, past and future are also conditioned. Past may not be existent from the point of view of the present moment, but in its own time, it was present. I think past, future, and present, there is no basis for discriminating against them and according the present time greater reality as opposed to future and past.

This is a tricky one! But it has important implications for Madhyamikas understanding of the concept of time and especially the three tenses of past, present, and future. Hence, Tsongkhapa lists the unique perspective on the three tenses as another important tenet for the Madhyamaka Prasangika.

In brief, Tsongkhapa says that this reasoning on disintegration represents a form of reasoning that is most subtle and an important feature of Chandrakirti's tradition. He really sees this to be an important aspect of Chandrakirti's tradition. Essentially what he is saying is that disintegration is an event, an outcome, and arises as a result of conditions, therefore it must be recognized as conditioned phenomena. If disintegrating is a conditioned phenomena, an event, then disintegration, which is the result, should also be a conditioned event. This is what is called establishing disintegration as a conditioned phenomenon. That's an important aspect of Tsongkhapa's reading of Chandrakirti which of course has been critiqued by other Tibetan thinkers, Madhyamaka thinkers.

However, Tsongkhapa really reads something important into this because it has implications for the way in which we understand the nature of the three tenses. That's one of the reasons why this, and also if you accept disintegration as a conditioned phenomenon, then the process of disintegration carries on, therefore there is no need for positing something like foundational consciousness as a repository for karmic imprints. Once the karmic act is done, it comes to cease, and that cessation does not imply its total nonexistence. Disintegration keeps going through successive temporal stages until something comes into contact with it, immediate condition then gives rise to the effects of that karmic action. From this series of disintegration until the effect that arises, the continuity of the karmic potential is maintained. There are important implications for striving hard to prove that disintegration is as much a conditioned phenomenon as disintegrating.

I will have specific sections from Tsongkhapa's texts, especially from *Ocean of Reasoning* on the reading list to help you delve deeper into this whole discussion.

Conclusion and Key Points

To summarize, I think one of the important points I want to stress here is when relating to Tsongkhapa's assertion of there being unique tenets of Prasangika, it's important not to confuse thinking Tsongkhapa accepts somehow Chandrakirti and others are out there to consciously differentiate themselves and start a new school. That's not what Tsongkhapa means.

Tsongkhapa's main point is that if we accept Prasangika's unique interpretation on Nagarjuna which involves rejection of intrinsic nature and svalakshana, intrinsic characteristics, even on the conventional level, no objective basis is left standing, then this has huge implications in many domains of Buddhist thought. These implications, when you flesh them out, points

toward standpoints of Prasangika Madhyamaka that are quite unique compared to other Madhyamaka commentaries. That's an important point.

Second, Tsongkhapa's writings contain two sets of interrelated and overlapping lists of 8. One is in *Illuminating the Intent* known as the Eight Unique Tenets of Prasangika. The other is in *Memorandum of Eight Difficult Points of Fundamental Wisdom*. They overlap but they are not the same list. On the second text [Memorandum] David Ruegg, a modern authority on Madhyamaka studies, a British academic scholar, has written a translation of this text as well as detailed critical analysis of this text.

Third, taking his cues from Chandrakirti's refutation of foundation consciousness in *Entering the Middle Way*, Tsongkhapa understands this refutation to entail acceptance of external reality on the conventional level.

Next, a consequence of this is the recognition of disintegration as a conditioned phenomena, contrary to other Buddhist schools for whom disintegration remains unconditioned.

Finally, Tsongkhapa understands Chandrakirti's critique of reflexive awareness to be primarily the refutation of cittamatra's important proof for their assertions of intrinsically real consciousness.

Thank you.

Verses for Meditation Practice

Opening: settling the mind practice
Nonreferential compassion meditation

If there are no sentient beings,
whom does one generate compassion for?
For beings imputed by ignorance,
whose existence one accepts for a purpose.
–BCA, 9.75

གལ་ཏེ་སེམས་ཅན་ཡོད་མིན་ན། །སྙིང་རྗེ་ཇི་ཞེ་ན།།
འཁྲུལ་བྱའི་དོན་དུ་ཁས་བླངས་པའི། །རྟོག་པས་བརྟགས་པ་གང་ཡིན་པའོ།།

Beings are like reflections of moon in a rippling water;
seeing them as fleeting and devoid of intrinsic nature,
the bodhisattva's mind falls under compassion's sway,
yearning to set free every transmigrating being.
–MA, 1.4

9 – Emptiness and Buddha-Nature

11/18/2022

Welcome to lesson nine. This class is on a very important topic in Mahayana Buddhism, including Madhyamaka philosophy as well, which is the relationship between emptiness and buddha-nature.

As you know, the Tibetan tradition sees itself as the continuation of the Indian Nalanda tradition. Indian Buddhism, one of the very important issues, at least towards the end of its stage in India, was the question of the relationship between these two foundational ideas in Mahayana Buddhism: Emptiness on the one hand and Buddha-Nature on the other.

Up until now we have focused exclusively and entirely on one side of the two coins, which is emptiness. On the emptiness side, it is very well known that the primary sources of Mahayana sutras are the Perfection of Wisdom sutras which formed the foundation for Nagarjuna's development of the Madhyamaka philosophy of emptiness in his very influential treatises such as *Treatise on the Middle Way* and other texts and many important influential commentators of Nagarjuna such as Aryadeva, Buddhapalita, Chandrakirti, Bhaviveka and so on, really then spread forth Nagarjuna's philosophy of emptiness. Of course, the philosophy of emptiness became very very dominant philosophy within the Mahayana tradition of India. That history is very clear and obvious and well known.

Source of Buddha-Nature teaching and its Development

What is less known is the history of the other strand within the Mahayana tradition, which is the teachings on buddha-nature. With respect to sutra sources, there are several sutras, but the most important sutra source for the buddha-nature teachings are The Tathāgatagarbha-sūtra and The Lion's Roar Sutra, The Śrīmālādevī-sūtra. These are the two most influential and important ones.

Then with respect to treatises, the most important and well known and authoritative treatise is recognized as *Ratnagotravibhāga* or *Uttaratantra* as it is known ultimately. This is in English often referred to as *The Sublime Continuum* text attributed to Maitreya.

There is another text attributed to Nagarjuna, *A Hymn to the Expanse of Reality*, Dharmadhātustava, which of course, the attribution to Nagarjuna is probably open to question but still the tradition accepts its attribution to Nagarjuna. This is one of the reasons why there is a strong tradition in Tibetan Buddhism where the suggestion is made that Nagarjuna's view of emptiness as presented in the Collection of Hymns, particularly *The Hymn to the Ultimate Expanse*, is closer to that of Maitreya's *Uttaratantra*. Whatever may be the case, but the point I'm trying to make is that with respect to treatises, the most important and authoritative Indian treatise is Maitreya's text, *Ratnagotravibhāga* or *Uttaratantra*, *Sublime Continuum*.

There are several important points that are brought up in the teachings of buddha-nature, which in a way, are accepted across the board in Mahayana Buddhism. (1) One is that the potential exists naturally in all sentient beings to become a buddha. That's one important explicit point brought up in the buddha-nature teachings. A second point is (2) that the essential nature of mind is pure and sometimes the language used is the essential nature of mind is clear-light or luminous. But the main point is that the essential nature of mind is pure. The third point that is made explicit in the buddha-nature teachings is (3) that the pollutants of the mind, the afflictions, ignorance and so on, they are adventitious. They are ultimately removable from the essential nature of the mind itself. Although they are natural aspects of the human mind, they are natural tendencies, and so on, they are deeply embedded, they are ingrained, they are innate, but they are essentially not part of the mind itself. They are removeable. They are adventitious.

If you look at each of these three main points that are made explicit in buddha-nature teachings, you can see versions of them even in other Mahayana Buddhist texts including sutras and treatises. These three points are not controversial even for followers of Nagarjuna's texts. The fact that the potential exists in all sentient beings naturally to become a Buddha, sometimes referred to as gotra or buddha-potential. Second is that the essential nature of mind is pure. In Madhyamaka language it is referred to as the natural purity of the mind and sometimes even referred to as the natural nirvana, rang zhin nyandé (W: rang bzhin myang 'das). That is again, also there in the Madhyamaka texts. Then, the third, that the pollutants of the mind suggest afflictions are adventitious and removeable has to be accepted by all Buddhism, not just Madhyamikas, because otherwise why bother making effort in entering the path and cultivating the wisdom of emptiness to remove and eliminate afflictions?

In any case, what makes the buddha-nature teaching important is its attempt to bring together these three elements in a powerful way and to convey to the audience a vision of how the process of enlightenment [works], because on the surface, if you look at Nagarjuna's texts, they are explicitly and almost primarily concerned with elimination of the reifications, the distortions of our perception of reality through removing layers and layers of constructs that we create upon reality through the teaching of emptiness, through meditation on emptiness and so on.

Tension and Purpose for Buddha-Nature Teaching

Clearly the Mahayana teachers themselves including the sutras recognized there is an inherent tension between these two teachings, emptiness on the one hand and the teaching on buddha-nature on the other. This tension is actually perceived in the early sources as well because in the emptiness teaching, the emphasis is really on the natural purity of phenomena, the fact that phenomena are all devoid of intrinsic existence. The emphasis is really on deconstruction, on removing any basis for objectification, any basis or ground to grasp onto. It's really a via negativa approach, removing away chip after chip or layer after layer and the constructs that have been built on. The emphasis is really on removal, deconstruction, and undoing of the constructs that our mind creates.

On the other hand, in the buddha-nature teaching, there seems to be a suggestion of some kind of essence that is naturally present in all beings. Sometimes the sutras that teach buddha-nature in fact characterize this essence, which is supposed to naturally exist in all beings, as eternal, pure, blissful, true self. Of course, on the surface, we can see a kind of a tension, not just a tension, even a potential possible conflict between these two sets of teachings. One being very radical, categorical, cutting through, removing, deconstructing, and really not leaving any trace, even a tiniest particle that can be objectified. On the other, there is an emphasis on affirmative language, of there being a kind of a kernel, a core, an essence. Here, the Sanskrit term we use buddha-nature to translate is tathāgatagarbha. Tathāgatagarbha literally means essence of tathāgata or essence of buddha. Sometimes people translate it also as womb of buddhahood, so there is this idea of a kernel, an essence.

On the surface, at least on the language level, linguistic level, there is clearly a tension if not a conflict. For example, in Maitreya's *Ratnagotravibhāga*, *Uttaratantra*, there are two sentences in the first chapter, the chapter on tathāgatagarbha where actually this tension is brought up. A question is raised, two objections: (1) the objection pointing out the contradiction between the subject matter and intent of the Perfection of Wisdom sutras on the one hand, and the sutras that teach buddha-nature on the other. (2) There is no point in teaching the essence, buddha-nature. Here I will read these two stanzas. It's crucial to really appreciate and recognize that tension that goes all the way back to the authoritative treatises themselves that present buddha-nature. I read:

> *Having stated here and there that just like clouds, dreams, and illusions, all knowable objects are empty in every respect, why then did the conquerors say here that the buddha essence exists in sentient beings?*
>
> *They taught this so that those in whom they exist may relinquish the five flaws: faithlessness, contempt for inferior sentient beings, clinging to what is unreal, depreciating perfect dharma, and excessive attachment to oneself.*
>
> *Maitreya – Treatise on the Sublime Continuum, 1:159-162*

In many other sutras, Buddha talked about how all phenomena are empty in every respect. They are illusion-like, they are like clouds, dreams, and illusions. But on the other hand, here now in this Tathāgatagarbha-sūtra and others, the Buddha is saying that the buddha-essence exists in all sentient beings. That's one objection raised pointing out the potential contradiction.

The second stanza points towards the purpose of why the buddha-nature teaching was taught. It was to help overcome these five faults. In some ways, we could say that this tension between the teaching on buddha-nature and emptiness reflects something deeper in the overall Mahayana tradition where two powerful strands seem to pull in different directions. Tensions need not necessarily be negative. In some ways, tensions are positive; they are what bring creativity.

For example, it can reflect the tension between understanding the nature of reality purely in via negativa terms verses seeking a more positive characterization of ultimate reality, at least of the nature of mind. That's one tension that is felt.

Another tension is between ontology—ontology is [the study of] the nature of reality, what exists out there—that emphasizes emptiness of intrinsic existence, no reification on the one hand, and soteriology that is the path to enlightenment that seeks to account for the enlightenment of true awakening. So, the description of reality versus the description of the path to enlightenment. There's a kind of tension.

Then, a third area of tension is envisioning enlightenment primarily in terms of a progressive freedom from grasping. Remember? Our grasping of fundamental ignorance is so deep and profound and ingrained that you need to chip away layer after layer to finally get to it and remove it. Liberation is defined by the removal of that final ignorance. Envisioning enlightenment primarily in terms of progressive freedom from grasping versus in terms of the primordial purity of the mind whose nature is pure and uncontaminated. There is a tension there. The buddha-nature teachings try to envision an enlightenment process which is like increasingly having the natural luminosity of the mind come out brighter and brighter.

The tension is there, so the tension between emptiness teaching and buddha-nature teaching is reflective of the tension between various aspects within the Mahayana tradition as a whole. I think it is important to situate our understanding of the relationship between these two in this broader context of Mahayana thought in general.

Ratnagotravibhāga, The Uttaratantra, Sublime Continuum

I said that the most important authoritative treatise on buddha-nature is Maitreya's *Ratnagotravibhāga*, *The Uttaratantra*, *Sublime Continuum*. *The Sublime Continuum* is a really remarkable text, and it is a text dedicated to one important theme or subject matter, which is described as dhatu or basic element. The whole text is really about the basic element, and it is structured in such a way in terms of the nature of the basic element, its enlightened attributes, and its qualities, and its fruits. The basic element is described in terms of what the text refers to as the Seven Diamond-like Points. These are (1-3) the three jewels which are the fruits of the basic element, (4) the basic element itself, and then (5) enlightenment and (6) enlightened qualities and (7) enlightened activities as factors that would enhance the cleaning of that basic element, thus culminating in the attainment of enlightenment.

It's a really remarkable text and the most important chapter of its five chapters is the first one which deals with the nature of the three jewels and more importantly, the discussion on the basic element itself, which is the tathagatagarbha. What the text envisions is this basic element is seen as the ultimate nature of the mind and it's a progressive cleansing of that basic element that results in the attainment of dharmakaya. It talks about the basic element in its state when it is impure, which is the sentient beings stage, and the basic element in its stage as partially pure and partially impure. This is on the stages of the bodhisattvas when progressively you

remove layers and layers of afflictions and ignorance. Then, it talks about the basic element in its stage as pure, perfectly pure, which is the state of buddhahood.

The perfectly pure basic element is the dharmakaya and the impure basic element is buddha-nature, the tathagatagarbha. Enlightenment is envisioned in terms of the progressive cleansing and purification of this basic element. It's a beautiful text and of course, it's also quite poetic because it uses powerful imagery in describing how the mind itself is obscured by the pollutants and what is the relationship between pollutants and what it pollutes. How does the corresponding antidote function in removing the obscuration. It uses imagery, for example, like the sky which is in itself completely pure and unobscured, but temporarily obscured by clouds and how, through removal of the clouds, the natural purity of the sky will shine out.

There are a lot of powerful imageries that are used. The tradition is to really study Maitreya's text on the basis of the only Indian commentary that we know of on the *Uttaratantra* and that is attributed to Asanga. Of course, whether or not that attribution is accurate is another question. Similarly, the attribution of this text to Maitreya is also open to question, but the fact is that the *Uttaratantra*, *The Sublime Continuum* text is a hugely influential text in Mahayana Buddhism. That's a fact that needs to be recognized regardless of whether one may question its attribution to Maitreya who is the author of another influential text in Perfection of Wisdom studies, the *Ornament of Realization*, *Abhisamayālaṃkāra*. Whether that is the same author is a separate question, but for our purposes it's important to recognize that in the Indian and Tibetan tradition both attribute this hugely influential text to Maitreya and it is seen as the most authoritative treatise on buddha-nature. The commentary that is attributed to Asanga is really an important one. The tradition of the Tibetan interpretation is to read them alongside.

As an aside, there is a curious story about Maitreya's text, *Sublime Continuum*, because textual evidence of existing Indian sources reveals that there was no cognizance of this text for quite a while in India until around the 10th century. Even among important commentators on Perfection of Wisdom studies, including Maitreya's texts like the *Ornament of Mahayana Sutras*, *The Ornament of Realization*, *Abhisamayālaṃkāra*, there are extensive commentaries written on these Maitreya texts which also include discussions of the gotra, which is the buddha potential. They show cognizance of Maitreya's other works, but in none of these major writings, some of which are voluminous, quite extensive, do they show any cognizance of the presence of this text, *Uttaratantra*, which raises the important question about its status and authorship and all the rest.

Also, there is a curious story in Go Lotsawa, the 14th or early 15th century influential author of the Tibetan historical book called the Blue Annals. Go Lotsawa was a great Kagyupa master, thinker, and teacher. He was also a student of Je Tsongkhapa and received his teachings on *Uttaratantra* from Tsongkhapa.

Go Lotsawa wrote quite an extensive commentary on *Uttaratantra*, but he says in the *Blue Annals* that in India, among the Indian masters, there was no awareness of this text for a long time and Maitripa, who is 10th century, one day when he was circumambulating a monastery,

as he was going around, he saw a crack in one of the stupas from which a light was emerging. He then opened up the stupa and in that stupa, he found the *Uttaratantra* and another text attributed to Maitreya, the Dharma-dharmatā-vibhāga which is *Differentiation of Phenomena and Ultimate Nature*. So, Go Lotsawa seems to have recognized that there was no cognizance of this text among major Indian authors for a long time. Maitripa is quite late, 10th century. In any case, in Tibet, of course, *Uttaratantra* became hugely influential.

In any case, regardless of whether Indian authors were aware of the presence of *Uttaratantra*, *Sublime Continuum* or not, they were aware of the concept of buddha-nature, tathagatagarbha. On the whole, the cittamatra, mind-only school masters interpreted tathagatagarbha in terms of foundational consciousness, alaya. They see it as a synonym for alaya and took the teaching to be definitive because they accept alaya.

The Madhyamaka masters, most of them were fairly silent on the topic of buddha-nature. There were one or two, for example like Bhaviveka explicitly talks about tathagatagarbha teaching and theory and he takes it to be provisional and he says that the teaching is given in order to help assuage the fears of people who still have strong conditioning of grasping to atman-like concept. They need some kind of pseudo-atman to hold onto and the teaching is given partly to empower them and give them courage. The ultimate intent of the teaching is to point towards emptiness, but the teaching itself is provisional, and the ultimate referent of the term tathagatagarbha should be understood in terms of emptiness of the mind.

In any case, most of the Madhyamaka masters, for example, Chandrakirti has a discussion of this and he, again, reads the teaching as provisional, not definitive, along the lines of Bhaviveka, and says that the aim of the Buddha here is to point towards emptiness of inherent existence and the teaching is given primarily to help give courage to people who otherwise may not be drawn to the teaching on emptiness. For them, they need some kind of prop, but if you embrace the literal truth of these teachings, Chandrakirti is citing the Lankavatara sutra, and says then you will be falling into the same trap as holding onto the non-Buddhist notion of atman. So, Madhyamaka masters on the whole did not take the teaching very seriously and attribute provisional status to them.

Vajrayana and the Doha Tradition

Now of course, around the 10th century by which time Vajrayana Buddhism is in ascendence, and then we definitely see in India a resurgence in interest in the teaching on buddha-nature and also beginnings of an attempt to interpret buddha-nature in terms of the luminosity of the mind. That's a kind of later development and that blends very nicely with the vajrayana teachings on the clear light, natural luminosity, innate wisdom, all of this. It really blends nicely with those teachings that are coming from especially highest yoga tantra.

Also, a large part of the influence came from the mahasiddhas, especially the doha literature, who emphasized the naturalness of the potential for buddhahood and naturalness of the purity of the mind and how the practice aims to bring that natural buddha to shine out. There was a

lot of emphasis on innate-ism, naturalness, and allowing the essential natural mind to manifest by itself. All of that sort of trend that are quite important in the doha literature of Saraha and others, which ultimately became the basis for the emergence of Kagyu Mahamudra, the Mahamudra teachings in Tibet, then the trend emerged where the authoritative texts like *Ratnagotravibhāga*, *Uttaratantra*, *The Sublime Continuum*, and the teaching concept of buddha-nature is now interpreted primarily in terms of referring to luminosity, the natural luminosity of the mind. That's roughly the Indian context.

Various Interpretations inside Tibet

In Tibet, Maitreya's text, *Uttaratantra*, was first translated by Ngok Lotsawa Loden Sherab, the most influential translator in the history of Tibetan Buddhism and also the founder of Tibetan scholastic tradition. He was influential in translating major texts of the Perfection of Wisdom category as well as pramana and also, he translated this *Uttaratantra*, *The Sublime Continuum* text. He also wrote an outline summary of this text as well as an actual commentary on this text and then set forth the spreading of this buddha-nature teaching in Tibet.

If you look at the history of Buddhism inside Tibet, we can broadly see several camps in their understanding and interpretation of buddha-nature teachings and the concept of buddha-nature. Ngok Loden Sherab took the teaching to be definitive and interpreted buddha-nature primarily in terms of the emptiness of the unenlightened mind as well as the emptiness of the Buddha's mind as well. He equated basic element with the tathagatagarbha, buddha-nature. He took the teachings to be definitive.

Then you have the influential Sakya masters, Sakya Pandita, for whom the buddha-nature teachings, as well as the concept are provisional, and he followed the example of Indian Madhyamaka masters saying that the primary purpose of these teachings is to give courage to people who still cling onto some vestiges of grasping at atman-like concept, who would otherwise not be attracted by Mahayana Buddhism. In order to help skillfully guide them ultimately to the truth of emptiness, concepts like essence were brought out. For him, both garbha, buddha-nature as a concept, as well as the teachings, were provisional, not to be taken literally.

Then you have Karmapa Rangjung Dorje, who was influential in interpreting the tathagatagarbha theory inside Tibet. He took the teachings not only to be definitive, but in contradistinction to Ngok Lotsawa's interpretation and Rangjung Dorje is actually picking up on the transmission of this text coming not from Ngok Loden Sherab, but from another translator, Tsen Khawoche,[14] whose translations we don't have today, it's not extent anymore. But Tsen Khawoche was another translator who produced another translation of *Uttaratantra* and this lineage, this transmission of the *Uttaratantra* was being developed by Karmapa Rangjung Dorje and the most important aspect of that is to now interpret the concept of buddha-nature in terms of the natural luminosity of the mind. Of course, as a Kagyu master, you can see that

[14] Here is an article discussing the lineage transmissions of Ngok Lotsawa and Tsen Khawoche.

would be natural. Also, to develop a kind of quite subtle understanding of how even the enlightened qualities of the Buddha are somehow naturally present, in least in the form of potential. Not only the potential for dharmakaya is present, but including all the enlightened qualities of the Buddha are somehow present, at least in the form of a potential.

That's an important development, a different one. So you have Ngok Loden Sherab and Sakya Pandita, these are two different polar opposites. Then you have Rangjung Dorje somewhere in the middle who takes it to be definitive but then interprets buddha-nature in terms of this natural luminosity.

Then comes Dolpopa, the great master in the Jonang school. Dolpopa's position is very very different. Not only did he take it to be definitive, but for Dolpopa, the buddha-nature teaching is the culmination of the Mahayana Buddhist teaching. Not only is the buddha-nature teaching definitive, buddha-nature exists naturally in all of us, but in fact, he interprets buddha-nature to be buddha, actual buddha, that is fully present in all of us, but we just don't know. We are enlightened, we are fully buddha, each of us possess buddhahood, buddha in us, not just in the form of a potential, actual buddha endowed with all the enlightened qualities of the buddha. It is present in us. He takes it to be eternal, blissful, true self, he uses all the language that you would normally find associated with atman and he equates this with many of the important concepts like bodhicitta in the tantra and a lot of these, Vajrasattva, Vajradhara, all of these he attributes, equates, with the concept of buddha-nature. Therefore, Dolpopa is one of the most important proponents of the Shentong philosophy, extrinsic emptiness. Even emptiness is now understood in affirmative terms, as not simply an emptiness of intrinsic existence, but emptiness itself truly existent. It is absolute. Dolpopa's position is actually quite distinct.

Tsongkhapa did not write extensively on buddha-nature, but he did teach Maitreya's text as we know from biographies several times, so it was an important text for him. Tsongkhapa's own position is inferred based on his principal student Gyaltsab Je's extensive commentary on *Uttaratantra*, *Sublime Continuum*. We take Gyaltsab Je's views to represent his teacher's view. So, Tsongkhapa's position can be seen as probably a version of Ngok's position. For him, the teaching is definitive, but the buddha-nature has to be understood in terms of the emptiness of the mind and the difference is, for Tsongkhapa, buddha-nature has to be understood only at the causal stage. The buddha-nature exists only in sentient beings, not in the Buddha. That's the only difference between Ngok Loden Sherab and Tsongkhapa. Otherwise, Tsongkhapa's position is quite similar to Ngok.

I think it's important to have this broader background because there is clearly a lot of diversity among the Tibetan interpretations of buddha-nature. As I said earlier, some of the important points that are really appreciated from the buddha-nature teaching by all the masters including Sakya Pandita who takes it to be provisional, is that the buddha-nature teachings and the treatises in the sutras are the ones that really highlight the natural purity of the mind and luminosity of the mind and also the fact that afflictions are adventitious and removable and also how potential for buddhahood is something that exists naturally in all of us. I said this

earlier. On these points, there is a unanimous appreciation of the role that buddha-nature teachings play.

Just as the *Uttaratantra* transitions from having presented the nature of the three jewels, and then moving on to the actual discussion of the natural basic element, kham, dhatu (W: khams, S: dhātu), there is a summary verse which probably is the most important verse in *Sublime Continuum*. Let me read this, because the diverse interpretations of buddha-nature can be easily ascertained by looking at how a master interprets this stanza.

> *Because (1) the Buddha's body radiates [to all beings],*
> *because (2) no difference exists with respect to suchness,*
> *and because (3) dispositions (gotra) exist, all beings are*
> *endowed always with the essence of the Buddha.*
>
> *Maitreya – Treatise on the Sublime Continuum, 1:27*

This is *Uttaratantra* chapter 1:27. This is the most important verse, and you can see what a particular person's view on buddha-nature is based on how that person interprets this important stanza.

Here, three arguments or reasons are given to make the point that all sentient beings are endowed with buddha-nature, essence of the buddha. One is the Buddha's body radiates towards all beings. Second is that there is no difference when it comes to the suchness between the enlightened mind of the buddha and the unenlightened mind of sentient beings. Insofar as their suchness is concerned, they are completely undifferentiable. Third, dispositions exist. This is the gotra, sometimes translated as lineage, buddha lineage, exists in all beings. Therefore, it says, they are endowed always with buddha-nature.

If we look at Gyaltsab, who is Tsongkhapa's main disciple, who wrote an extensive commentary on *Uttaratantra*, he interprets the first reason as Buddha's enlightened activities touching sentient beings. The fact that sentient beings have the capacity to benefit from Buddha's activity, to receive radiations of Buddha's enlightened activity.

The second he understands refers to the emptiness of the mind. With respect to emptiness, there is no difference at all between that of the unenlightened mind of sentient beings and the enlightened mind of the Buddha.

The third he understands to be natural dispositions that exist in all beings. When Gyaltsab interprets garbha, he wants to avoid reifying the essence and pointing it towards one thing. He basically reads this stanza as saying that the main point of the stanza is to really point out that the basic potential for buddhahood exists in all of us, therefore, something like the nature of the buddha is present in us, at least in the causal capacity. The reason for that is these three things.

Now, when the push comes to the shove of what exactly is the concept of buddha-nature referring to, he would say primarily to the emptiness of the unenlightened mind. But then he would say it also refers to the dispositions as well. There is not just one thing that is called the essence, that is called garbha. This, I think, is important. There is a beautiful text in one of the Library of Tibetan Classics volumes. We have a dedicated volume on buddha-nature and there is a beautiful text from Ju Mipham, 19th century Nyingma master, just on the interpretation of this stanza. It's a beautiful text called Lion's Roar.

Tsongkhapa's Position on Buddha-Nature

Now as I said earlier, one way of looking at Tsongkhapa's position on buddha-nature is to see it as a variation of Ngok Lotsawa Loden Sherab's position. It's an influential position. If we identify some of the key aspects of Tsongkhapa's interpretation of the buddha-nature theory, he understands the teaching to be definitive. Here he differs from his personal teacher Rendawa. Rendawa was like Sakya Pandita. For Rendawa, buddha-nature teaching is provisional and in fact for Rendawa, *Uttaratantra* itself belongs to cittamatra school, whereas for Tsongkhapa, the teaching is definitive.

Secondly, *Uttaratantra*, *The Sublime Continuum*, and its commentary belongs to Madhyamaka Prasangika perspective, an important point that Tsongkhapa makes. The commentary on *Uttaratantra* attributed to Asanga reads *Uttaratantra Sublime Continuum* from the perspective of Prasangika Madhyamaka.

Third, buddha-nature primarily refers to the emptiness of the unenlightened mind.

Fourth, Tsongkhapa understands the reference to the word garbha, essence, not in the form of an actual buddhahood but as a causal stage of buddhahood. Here, the basic element is also understood, at least on the stage of the sentient beings, in causal terms.

Tsongkhapa makes a distinction between natural element and buddha-nature. Remember, Ngok Loden Sherab equates the two. Therefore, for Ngok, buddha-nature exists also in the buddha, buddhahood. Tsongkhapa differentiates the former, basic element, in terms of impure, partially pure, and completely pure. Completely pure basic element is dharmakaya. That's one important aspect.

Finally, aspects of the sutra, especially pertaining to statements about eternal essence, for Tsongkhapa, is provisional and it is only taught to assuage those who are afraid of the teaching on emptiness due to their inclination towards atman.

Interestingly, Tsongkhapa seems to distinguish between two types of essence here. One is the essence referring to the garbha, which is buddha-nature, which he takes to be literal and definitive. But he says that in the same sutra, there is also a reference to another kind of essence, which is eternal and enduring and true self. That aspect of the teaching he takes to be

provisional and that aspect, that language specifically, he says, is there as a skillful means to help those who may otherwise be very afraid of the emptiness teachings.

In the Tibetan, he distinguishes between what is called deshek nyingpo (W: bde gshegs snying po) tathāgatagarbha or sugatagarbha[15] and tak ten gyi nying po (W: rtag brtan gyi snying po[16]) an essence that is eternal, enduring, and so on. That's an interesting distinction that is made and you will see that, for example, in Tsongkhapa's Essence of Eloquence. There's a section that deals with that.

Now, other Tibetan masters who comment on buddha-nature theory who like to interpret buddha-nature primarily in terms of the luminous nature of the mind critique Tsongkhapa and Ngok Loden Sherab's interpretation of buddha-nature in terms of the emptiness of the mind. Let me identify two important objections raised.

First is because emptiness is not a conditioned phenomenon, therefore, it cannot serve as the cause for the attainment of enlightenment. That's an important objection. Second is that emptiness of mind, again as unconditioned phenomena, cannot serve as the basis for the emergence for the enlightened qualities of the Buddha. Those are two important objections.

Now, because Tsongkhapa did not write extensively on buddha-nature theory, he did not entertain these kinds of objections, but in Gyaltsab's commentary, he entertains these objections and he explicitly says that the language of causality here is really not be understood in literal terms of producing causes. Let me cite from Gyaltsab's commentary on Sublime Continuum:

> *Even though it is not a cause of a buddha's gnosis in the sense of a producer, because it is the object of arya bodhisattva's meditative equipoise, which is the principal cause of a buddha's gnosis, and because of the reason that without it there cannot be a buddha's gnosis, it is described as a cause.*
>
> *Gyaltsab Je – Commentary on Treatise on the Sublime Continuum, 98*

Even though it is not a cause of a buddha's gnosis (he is talking about the emptiness of the mind in the sense of a producer, because it is the object of arya bodhisattva's meditative equipoise (talking about the emptiness of mind), which is the principal cause of a buddha's

[15] There seems to be a trend among translators to associate the two terms tathagatagarbha and sugatagarbha with different Tibetan terms. In this case, sugatagarbha has a stronger association with tantra and tathagatagarbha has a stronger association with sutra Mahayana (although many dictionaries define these as synonyms). The terms are:

Sugatagarbha: Essence of the Bliss Gone (Tib. བདེ་གཤེགས་སྙིང་པོ་, deshek nyingpo Wyl. bde gshegs snying po) or བདེ་བར་གཤེགས་པའི་སྙིང་པོ་, (dewar shekpé nyingpo)

Tathāgatagarbha: Essence of the Thus Gone (T: དེ་བཞིན་གཤེགས་པའི་སྙིང་པོ་, deshyin shegpé nyingpo, Wyl. de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po)

[16] I think Dr. Jinpa doesn't pronounce the gyi in his lecture, but I can't find it without that connector in the dictionaries, so I include it here so others can also find it.

gnosis, and because of the reason that without it (if the mind is not empty of inherent existence) there cannot be a buddha's gnosis, it is described as a cause.

He gives two explanations for why buddha-nature, which is the emptiness of the unenlightened mind, is referred to as the cause of buddhahood. One is because it is the object of bodhisattva's gnosis which is the correct cause for buddha's gnosis. Secondly, if the mind itself were not to be empty of intrinsic existence, there would be no possibility of buddhahood. It's sort of an explanatory cause. So, Gyaltsab responds in those ways.

Furthermore, in Tsongkhapa's *Illuminating the Intent*, although he's not explicitly speaking of buddha-nature there, in chapter 5 he cites two verses from *Hymn to the Ultimate Expanse of Reality*, *Dharmadhātustava*, and talks about how one needs to understand the process of enlightenment, not just in terms of one's mind becoming progressively removed from the afflictions, but also the emptiness of one's mind attaining, acquiring progressively greater purity.

Here, Tsongkhapa talks about two aspects of purity of our mind. One is the natural purity that is the emptiness itself. It is naturally pure and devoid of intrinsic existence, the natural nirvana. The other one is acquired purity. Acquired purity is purity that is attained in relation to having removed levels of obscurations. One is rang zhin gyi dak pa (W: rang bzhin gyis dag pa) and lo bur bé dak pa (W: blo bur bas dag pa). One is purity from the natural stain of intrinsic existence. The other one is the purity from adventitious stains of pollutants of the mind.

Tsongkhapa envisions enlightenment as a process by which the natural purity of the mind, in addition to natural purity of the mind, the mind itself… the emptiness of the mind, which is the nature of the mind itself, also becomes progressively perfect. This is going back to *Uttaratantra's* description of the three stages of the basic element. Impure, partially pure, and completely pure. Tsongkhapa envisions those stages to be referring to the mind but also referring to the emptiness of the mind. For Tsongkhapa, the causality, the causal language here need not be taken in a literal sense of producing, a cause producing an effect in a conditioned manner. I think it's helpful to have this larger background.

What I would like to do now is read from a beautiful text in verse. This is in Tsongkhapa's miscellaneous writings. It is a text that he sends to one of his senior students in eastern Tibet who requests him to write… it's part of a series of questions this master asked Tsongkhapa. At the end there is a caption of these verses. Tsongkhapa writes:

> *In response to your request for an instruction on how to relate the teaching of Madhyamaka treatises to the framework of ground, path, and result, as well as arising of the buddha bodies, buddha's gnosis, and the enlightened activities, I say the following:*

This short text I will read is not that well known because it's in miscellaneous writings, but it actually captures quite powerfully, beautifully, and eloquently Tsongkhapa's views on how he

relates the teachings of buddha-nature on the one hand, and the teachings on emptiness on the other. I'll read this slowly, and as I go, I will comment on it where necessary.

> *There are two types of ground in the learned one's treatises. One as the basis of eliminating superimpositions through scripture and reasoning and a ground that is the basis of the activity of purifying the stains.*

With respect to the idea of ground, he differentiates between two grounds. One is the ground in the sense of nature of reality, which is where there is a lot of discussion, debate, scripture, reasoning are there to aim us, help us develop a clear understanding of the nature of reality. This is essentially he is talking about emptiness.

A second ground he understands to be referring to a basis, the basic element we're talking about, the basis for the activity of purifying the stains. Then he says:

> *The first refers to the two truths:*

That's ground, path, and result. Then he describes what they are:

> *… ultimate truth free of elaboration preventing eternalism and illusion-like conventional truth preventing nihilism. Be free from the demon of evil views tending towards these two extremes of reification and denigration and of permanence and annihilation.*

He sees the teaching on the two truths, which relates to the natural ground, to be aimed at eliminating extreme views and finding the middle way. Then he goes on:

> *The second ground refers to the ultimate expanse of the contaminated mind.*

He's using the word expanse like in the Hymn to the Ultimate Expanse. He sees ground as referring to the basis of purifying activity.

> *Recognizing that in its own nature, it is primordially pure…*

He's talking about the mind.

> *… and that the contaminants are adventitious and removeable, you should strive to purify this natural sphere.*

He's talking about the basic element that Maitreya talks about. That's the ground.

> *The path of emptiness is that which actually purifies the stains.*

Now, having identified the basis, ground in the sense of the basis of purification, he then identifies that which purifies it. Here, he's talking about the path, he says emptiness is that which purifies the stains. The actual purifier is the path of emptiness.

> *However, that such a path does purify all contaminants together with the propensities, this is dependent on there being limitless collection of merit.*

The complementary factors.

> *So engage in the vast practice such as the cultivation of the two supreme minds…*

He is referring to the aspiring level of bodhicitta and engaging level of bodhicitta.

> *… uninterruptedly like the flow of a steady stream. This is the path that would please the conquerors. To engage in a partial approach would please only the childish.*

He's emphasizing the path should be comprehensive. Now he is moving on to results.

> *From the profound gnosis collection comes dharmakaya and from the vast merit collection comes the two form bodies, rupakayas. This, then, is the attainment of the final result. Each respectively is the basis of fulfilment of self and other's excellent welfare.*

Dharmakaya represents the fulfillment of one's own welfare and rupakaya, the form bodies, represents the fulfillment of other beings. Then he goes on to give a further explanation:

> *Just as the form and taste of a single lump of brown sugar cannot be separated, in the same way, the two buddha bodies which are dependent on a single causal collection consisting of twin collection cannot be separated.*

Just as we cannot separate the taste and form of sugar, in the same way, dharmakaya and the form body, the rupakaya, cannot be differentiated, separated.

> *There is no buddha body devoid of the enlightened mind perceiving the way things are and what there is.*

He is talking about the Buddha's gnosis pertaining to the ultimate truth, the way things are, and conventional truth, what there is.

> *Neither such a form body exists nor such dharmakaya exists. Therefore, in buddhahood, the two buddha bodies remain united.*

Just as on the ground, the two truths are inseparable, similarly in the resultant stage the two buddha bodies are united.

> *From this emerge enlightened activities that are effortless and remain present until the end of samsara. Through these enlightened activities endowed with twin qualities, the Buddha grants beings twin welfare.*

Self and others.

> *To the fortunate ones in a manner akin to wish-granting jems…*

Because wish-granting gems do not have any conscious intention. They are there just spontaneously granting wishes. Then he goes on to say…

> *… I've composed this briefly for you Lama, you who are immersed in the quest for enlightenment, you who are weighed down by virtuous qualities. You have asked that I respond to your queries in a few words.*
>
> *The path of the Great Sage, subtle and hard to understand, this path of emptiness is indeed most difficult to fathom. So you, the intelligent ones, should not be easily satisfied. You should make supplications to the gurus and meditation deities, and ripening your mindstream through merit gathering and purification. You should engage in fine analysis again and again. Then with your intellect advancing to ever higher levels, you will be able to discern even the extremely subtle points.*

I chose to bring this in because in very practical terms, Tsongkhapa brings together the insights of these two strands of Mahayana Buddhism and then also relates them to the ground, path, and result.

Conclusion and Key Points

Let me summarize the key points of what we've discussed. One of the things I haven't mentioned here is that buddha-nature, particularly understood as the luminous nature of mind, comes to acquire much greater importance in the vajrayana tradition. That's a separate discussion, but I think it's an important point that needs to be kept in mind.

First, there is a tension inherent in mahayana thought between two foundational concepts of emptiness and buddha-nature.

Madhyamaka masters generally interpreted buddha-nature in terms of emptiness of mind while Yogachara as foundation consciousness.

Later the tradition emerged in India possibly influenced by tantra to interpret buddha-nature primarily in terms of the luminous nature of the mind, as primordial gnosis or innate nature.

Broadly, five main traditions of interpretation of buddha-nature exist in the Tibetan tradition.

1. Ngok Lotsawa's tradition and interpretation
2. Sakya Pandita, Rendawa, and great masters in that [Sakya] tradition
3. Karmapa Rangjung Dorje
4. Dolpopa
5. Gelug tradition, including Tsongkhapa

Alternatively, one can view the Gelug tradition as a variation on Ngok Lotsawa's reading.

Next point, for Tsongkhapa, buddha-nature is to be understood in terms of the emptiness of the unenlightened mind. It's the basis for the purification of affliction. It is that which becomes buddha's natural dharmakaya in the resultant stage.

Thank you.

Verses for Meditation Practice

Opening: settling the mind practice

Meditation on the nature of the mind
Conventional nature as luminous and awareness
Ultimate nature as emptiness
Contemplate the adventitious nature of the pollutants as clouds in a sky
Rest your mind in emptiness of mind: free, luminous, and pure

Prayer Yearning for the Vision of Vajrayogini's Noble Face:

> The primordial nature free of arising, ceasing, and enduring;
> the innate sphere empty, luminous, and ineffable;
> this unity, beyond intellect is Vajrayogini, my own mind—
> recognizing myself, may I always be cared for by her.

རྒྱུ་འགག་གནས་གསུམ་བལ་བ་གངོ་མའི་གཏིས། །སྟོང་གསལ་བརྗོད་དུ་མེད་པ་གཞུག་མའི་ངང་།།
རྒང་འཇུག་ཟོལ་འདས་རང་སེམས་རྣལ་འབྱོར་མ། །རང་ངོ་ཤེས་ནས་རྟག་ཏུ་སྐྱོང་བར་ཞོག།

10 – Culmination of the Analysis of the View

11/25/2022

Welcome to the final class on Tsongkhapa's Madhyamaka, lesson ten, which is focused on the actual practice of emptiness and cultivating the view. The title of the class is Culmination of the Analysis of the View.

Brief Review of the Series

We began our ten-part course with the first lesson focused on the question of why emptiness matters. We learned in the end why emptiness matters is because it is the key to the attainment of enlightenment. Emptiness is the remedy against the fundamental ignorance that binds us in a constant cycle of existence and there is no second door to liberation other than emptiness.

[In class 2] we then looked at Tsongkhapa's own personal journey into finding the view. Then we moved on to the next question of what exactly is emptiness [in class 3]. Next we began more specifically with the elements of Tsongkhapa's Madhyamaka philosophy beginning with identifying the object of negation [class 4] and then the next class was on what remains in the wake of that negation [class 5] that took place in the context of emptiness, in other words, the status of conventional existence.

Then we opened that up further into looking at the important topic of the principle of the two truths [class 6], the hermeneutic principle that is important for Mahayana Buddhism in general and particularly for Madhyamaka philosophy in presenting their view of reality.

We then moved on to the important question about the distinction between two major strands of interpretation [class 7] of Nagarjuna's philosophy in the Madhyamaka tradition, one referred to as the Svatantrika Madhyamaka pioneered by Bhaviveka and followed by Jnanagarbha, Shantarakshita and so on, and the second strand emerging from Buddhapalita but more self-consciously after Chandrakirti's critique of Bhaviveka and defense of Buddhapalita. We looked at what is the point of departure between these two strands of interpretation, whether there is any substantive philosophical differences between the two approaches and Tsongkhapa's view on that.

This then led to further refinement of that distinction; we focused on looking at what Tsongkhapa identified as unique tenets of Prasangika Madhyamaka [class 8] which emerges as an implication of fleshing out the consequences of Chandrakirti's rejection of intrinsic nature and intrinsic characteristic and intrinsic arising even on the conventional level. Then we looked at this very important question of the relationship between buddha-nature and emptiness [class 9] which are the two foundational concepts in [Indian] Mahayana Buddhism as inherited by the Tibetan tradition.

Bringing it into Practice

Now in this final class, we'll be trying to bring all of these together into the context of how do we sit down and come to actually practice. What does it mean and what is the measure of having found the view because in lesson two we talked about Tsongkhapa's own journey of finding the view.

Also, what we will try to do now is in bringing the concept and teaching of emptiness in relation to personal practice, we need to bring two things together now. First is the point about emptiness being the ultimate nature of reality and how the understanding of this is key to removing our fundamental ignorance. That's the teaching insight coming from the Madhyamaka texts. Second is the understanding of how emptiness of our own mind as buddha-nature serves as the basis for purifying the pollutants of our mind, thus making it possible for attaining liberation from unenlightened existence. We need to bring these two insights—one coming from the Madhyamaka teachings on emptiness and the other coming from the buddha-nature teachings—together in the context of the practical application of the insight of emptiness.

In a nutshell, the teaching on emptiness teaches us that our innate grasping at objective intrinsic existence is what continues to chain us in this perpetual cycle of existence, with ignorance, afflictions, and so on. It is only by seeing through that fundamental delusion, through understanding emptiness in other words, that we will be able to undo that process that continues to chain us.

The buddha-nature teachings tell us the very fact that our deluded mind itself is devoid of intrinsic existence, it is naturally pure, and the very fact that the stains such as the afflictions that pollute the mind are adventitious and removeable is what makes it possible for us to begin with to have the potential to become fully enlightened.

A key part of this process of searching for enlightenment in the end involves, simply put, mind being able to see its own true nature. The deluded mind seeing its own true nature which is essentially empty, non-substantial, free of objective intrinsic existence. Mind seeing its own true nature can be understood as one of the most important projects of someone who is seeking enlightenment. When you combine the teachings of buddha-nature and teachings of emptiness together, in some sense, we can say this is the highest form of recognizing yourself. In the Tibetan tradition we use the phrase rang ngo shepa (W. rang ngo shes pa), recognizing yourself. Finally coming to know yourself in an essential, in an authentic true sense.

This reminds me of some memorable lines from Buddha's Dhammapada, a famous verse, 154 (Chapter 11, verse 9):

> *I've now seen you, housebuilder:*
> *never more shall you build this house.*
> *I have broken up your rafters;*

I have pulled down your roof;
my mind turned towards the unconditioned
will attain the cessation of craving.

Buddha – Dhammapada, 154

In a sense, realization of emptiness really involves seeing through the deception of the ignorant mind which goes through this very elaborate project of constructing a certain image of the world, an image of reality, compelling us to believe in that story that our deluded mind presents and develops. Realization of emptiness involves seeing through that deception and coming to recognize that there is actually no house. The house is just a fiction that has been built [and so we are] coming to recognize the essential nature of the mind which is essentially empty, free.

I think it's important to remember this and this also resonates with an important point that I covered in one of the earlier classes where Nagarjuna and Chandrakirti describes the function of meditation on emptiness as leading to bringing about the quietening and the calming and silencing of the chatter of conceptual elaboration that is a kind of minimizing and limiting and ultimately silencing of all that restless chatter and conceptual elaboration. It is like what Buddha is saying in the Dhammapada. Realization of no-self is essentially finding that there is no self that is the builder of the house. Similarly, realization of emptiness from the buddha-nature point of view really involves realizing mind's own true nature, essential nature, which is empty, and that really is the heart of the path of enlightenment.

Five Styles of Meditation on Emptiness

Now the question is how do we go about bringing all of this into practice? In other words, how does one sit down and actually start meditating on emptiness? Here, Tsongkhapa, in one of his shorter texts in a collection of oral teachings, there is a text called "Short notes on the view", tawé yik chung (W: lta ba'i yig chung). In that short piece on the view, Tsongkhapa speaks of five distinct styles of meditation on emptiness.

1. On the beginner's stage, when cultivating experiential understanding of the view, the aim is to cultivate an experiential understanding, not just intellectual.
2. When cultivating insight on emptiness based on a similitude of tranquility. Cultivating a similitude of shamatha, some degree of stillness of the mind, and then cultivating insight.
3. Cultivating insight on the basis of the genuine attainment of shamatha, tranquility. That's an advanced form. Once you have actually attained true shamatha, tranquility, then there is a different style of meditation on emptiness that comes with it.
4. When one has gained direct realization of emptiness. At that point, it's a total nonduality. There's no subject-object duality. Mind is completely fused, immersed, inseparably, indivisibly in the experience of emptiness.
5. When meditating on emptiness in the vajrayana completion stage. That's a more advanced stage of tantra where one cultivates the gnosis of the union of bliss and

> emptiness. There, the meditating mind is not just at the level of intellect. It's really a very deep level of innate wisdom, innate primordial mind which is tinged with the experience of bliss.

He identifies these five distinct styles of meditation and so, depending on where you are, you're supposed to adopt those different styles. Here, our focus is really with the first one on the beginner's stage. That is what concerns us.

Begin with the Selflessness of Persons

Tsongkhapa says that when you bring down all the teachings on emptiness and now begin to implement it in practice, there are two forms of selflessness, the selflessness of persons and the selflessness of phenomena. A very general presentation of emptiness takes the form of teaching on the two selflessness. He says although in many treatises, when emptiness is presented, selflessness of phenomena tends to be presented first and selflessness of persons comes later as a kind of distillation of that, when you sit down to meditate, you should start with selflessness of persons.

He says it's not because there is a difference in the subtlety of what is being negated. The selflessness of person and selflessness of phenomena are equally subtle levels of emptiness. But because of the significance of the basis upon which you are doing the meditation of emptiness, there is a better impact, more immediate impact, when you choose selflessness of person to be your initial focus. That's partly because here he is talking about meditation of the selflessness of persons, not just of some other person out there, but actually your own personal existence and taking your own sense of self to be the object of analysis and inquiring deeply into that critical self-inquiry.

This, of course, sits really well with what Chandrakirti says in his *Entering the Middle Way* where he writes in chapter 6 verse 120:

> *Seeing with their wisdom that all afflictions and all faults*
> *stem from the identity view grasping at the perishable collection,*
> *and knowing that self is the focus of this identity view,*
> *the yogi engages in the negation of selfhood.*
>
> *Chandrakirti - Entering the Middle Way,*

Here, Chandrakirti is explaining how with their wisdom, the yogis come to recognize that their sense of "I-am," which is the identity view, really latches onto the aggregates, the perishable collection, and based upon the aggregates the notion of a sense of self arises and this identity view grasping at the thought "I-am" has self as its object of apprehension. Therefore, yogis take the self to be the object of critique and negation when they sit down in meditation. This, I think, is an important point Chandrakirti is making because this is also the reason why Tsongkhapa

says that when you sit down to meditate, you should start with selflessness of person meditation.

If you look at, for example, Tsongkhapa's insight section on the *Great Treatise [of the Stages of the Path, Lamrim Chenmo]* the selflessness of person is presented in very practical terms. There's a long discussion of various aspects of the Madhyamaka philosophy of emptiness and when it culminates in the actual practice, he presents the selflessness of person there. If you look at this text as well as Tsongkhapa's shorter texts, there is a beautiful text on the *Guide to the View according to Prasangika Madhyamaka* in Tsongkhapa's collected writings in volume dza.

Basic Conceptual Understanding and Some Shamatha

What all of this suggests is the following: in order to do emptiness meditation, even on the beginner's stage, you need to first cultivate an intellectual understanding of emptiness. You cannot just sit down and close your eyes and just hope something will happen. That's not really Tsongkhapa's approach. He basically is insisting that you first study the texts, contemplate, develop some intellectual understanding of emptiness through listening to teachings, through studying, through your own personal contemplation. That, in some sense, is a kind of a condition that you need to create to get into emptiness meditation because you need to bring to mind something. If you have not developed at least some intellectual understanding, you don't have anything to tap into.

On top of that, he advises that we need to also cultivate a degree of mental stability, sem kyi né pa (W: sems kyi gnas pa) and some kind of shamatha practice needs to be there because if we are not able to settle down our mind in a conscious way to get to a bit more quieter restful state, then we wouldn't have the ability to apply that mind. So, some kind of disciplined application of mind is involved in meditation on emptiness, therefore, some degree of mental discipline is presumed. Therefore, some kind of not necessarily full shamatha, but some semblance of shamatha, the ability to consciously quiet your mind and make it more restful is crucial.

With respect to that practice, there are many techniques but in the Buddhist tradition, generally, the preferred technique is using mindfulness of breath as a practice. Either through counting the breath or simply resting your mind on the movement of the inflow and outflow of the breath so in this way you calm your restless mind to be more focused and restful.

Now once you have acquired these two conditions, these are preconditions, one is some understanding of emptiness based on your reading, study, and contemplation [and two is some semblance of shamatha]… what Tsongkhapa is proposing and generally I would argue in Buddhist tradition, what is being asked is not simple! That's one of the things about Buddhism. Buddhism is not a spiritual path that is easy for anyone. It demands quite a lot on the part of the practitioner, particularly. So these are the two conditions: (1) developing some basic level

understanding of emptiness through study and contemplation. (2) is some degree of mental stability so that you have the ability to apply your mind.

Four Key Points of Analysis on Emptiness

Once you have cultivated these two, then when you sit down to do the actual meditation on emptiness, then the format that is recommended is what are known as the four key or essential points. We briefly touched upon them in one of the earlier classes.

1. The key point of identifying the object of negation. This is a critical self-inquiry about observing your own state of mind and checking how does this sense of self arise and how does the self appear when the thought "I am" arises?
2. The logical entailment that if such a self does exist, it must necessarily exist as identical with the aggregates, the mind-body, or as something independent or separate from the mind and body. That's logical entailment. It must necessarily exist as either of the two.
3. Going into the meditation to contemplate that the self is not identical with body and mind. It's not the same as the body and mind.
4. Contemplate that the self is not separate, independent from the body and mind. This is the absence of difference.

These are the four key steps or points that are recommended and Tsongkhapa is very clear in suggesting that the effort should really be placed upon the first stage, identifying the object of negation. That's why his writings on Madhyamaka focus so much on that point, just getting clear about what exactly you are negating. But in the context of practice, you're not doing a theoretical exercise of what is the delimitations, but rather trying to get an experiential feeling for how a sense of self arises.

Tsongkhapa reminds us that this is not an easy task because mind is fluctuating all the time and even though we assume self to be something that is so familiar to us, but when you actually sit down to consciously observe how self arises to our mind, it may not be that easy to capture. What he says is that somehow we have to be able to apply a refined and subtle meta-awareness. You observe the bulk of your mind, you allow a sense of self to arise, and from a corner part of your mind you observe it in a sort of a meta level of awareness and if necessary, sometimes you may need to even imagine a scenario where a sense of self could arise more strongly. This is where emotions matter because when strong emotions arise, the sense of self is very strong. When you feel angry, you are feeling angry because you feel threatened and you react very strongly. In that moment there is a very strong sense of I attached to this.

Similarly, when you are afraid, there is a strong sense of self. When you crave for something there is also a strong sense of self. In later Gelug practice manuals on cultivating the view, there is even a suggestion that you imagine scenarios like someone accusing you unjustly of having done something. Then you imagine reacting, "How dare he accuse me!?" In this way, you allow a strong sense of self to appear and at that moment you need to be able to pay attention and apply meta-awareness and rest your mind and observe it.

Then, when you observe it, Tsongkhapa says that the sense of self sometimes is fused with focus on our states of mind or body but sometimes it feels as if it is independent. He is really giving us the idea that it is a very delicate activity that we're engaged in where you really need to have quite a fine balance of a settled mind, at the same time allowing the possibility of this application of meta-awareness, observing. Of course, there will be moments where there will be clarity, but it may not stay very long, then it will collapse. But then you need to once again refresh it. In this way, his suggestion is to really strive hard and pay more attention, spend more time in the first stage of identifying the object of negation, what that self is.

Then, once you feel you have identified self or some degree of an understanding of the notion of self, then you go through the remaining steps of logical entailment—it's not identical with body and mind, it's not independent from body and mind—and then you conclude that, "the self that I assumed as having some kind of intrinsic existence, some kind of discrete reality and that seems to be so important to me doesn't exist at all."

Balance between Resting and Analysis

Then, Tsongkhapa says, it is very important to rest your mind on the conclusion—that no such self exists—in a powerful way, in a forceful way. There Tsongkhapa explains that a large part of the function of meditation on emptiness is to apply in a very balanced way a resting approach of the mind and then discursive inquiry. Discursive inquiry will give rise to more forceful ascertainment of the absence of self and then resting of the mind on that conclusion will allow that ascertainment to be integrated by stabilizing it. As you rest on that conclusion, at some point, gradually, naturally, the force of the ascertainment will wane, and when it begins to wane, you then need to refresh the ascertainment once again through quickly going through the inquiry and discursive analysis.

Therefore, for Tsongkhapa, in meditation on emptiness, analysis and resting the mind really play equally important roles. The meditation should not be conceived purely in terms of stopping your thought, resting your mind. It needs a very fine balance. Then he explains how as you progress in your practice, your need for analysis will decrease because your analysis will become ever finer and subtler to the point where… sometimes the analogy is given that when small fish swim in a lake, they don't disturb the stability of the water at all. Without any obstruction, they move around. In the same way, when you have quite a stable mind through mental stillness, then inquiry and analysis can also become very subtle, which would not undermine… generally when we apply the mind, engage the mind, stability gets lost. When we stabilize the mind then the sharpness of the insight and understanding tends to wane. Generally, one undermines the other, but in advanced meditation practice they begin to reinforce each other.

During the formal sitting practice, he really emphasizes the need for this very fine balance and to what extent you need to apply discursive analysis, to what extent you need to rest your mind

on the conclusion is something you have to learn as you go through it. There's no one solution for everybody. It depends very much individually.

Post-Meditation Practice: Be a Child of Illusion

Then, also important is that during the post-meditation period, in your everyday activity, you really need to constantly recollect your awareness of emptiness during the formal sitting and to the extent it is possible, apply that insight and understanding to everything that you do. This is when what is called the post-meditation illusion-like character practice [is applied]. You begin to see all phenomena in an illusion-like manner. They seem to suggest as though they have concrete existence, but in reality they don't.

It's a bit like when we watch a movie, we allow our mind to accept… basically when we watch a movie, if you constantly remind yourself, "This is not true, this is unreal, this is fiction," then you're not going to enjoy the movie. A sort of suspension of disbelief is required to fully enjoy and immerse yourself in a film. Once you suspend your disbelief as part of your participation in the movie-watching and you start watching, you actually get into the movie, you identify with a character, you immerse yourself and the emotions are also felt. In the same way, what Tsongkhapa is suggesting here is that the yogis coming out of their formal sitting meditation, they will be able to view reality in a robust way while being aware of their empty nature.

So, the practice of emptiness should not be confined only to formal sitting. You need the cultivation of the intellectual understanding, then formal sitting which requires the balanced application of discursive analysis and resting of the mind on the conclusion, and then post-meditation period where you consciously apply that insight to everything that you perceive. In this way, the realization of emptiness will be reinforced.

Ascertainment and Certainty

One of the important concepts within all of this for Tsongkhapa is the role of what he calls ascertainment or ngé shé (W: nges shes) or ngé pa (W: nges pa). This is an important aspect of Tsongkhapa's teaching on the meditation on emptiness.

Structurally, ascertainment entails there being a mode of apprehension, namely, when you meditate on emptiness at the conclusion arrived at, there is a conscious awareness of the emptiness, emptiness of inherent existence. There is a conscious awareness of emptiness. There is also certainty born of knowing that self indeed is devoid of intrinsic existence. There's a kind of a certainty that goes with it. It's a conclusive state of mind. Here it's important you remember one needs to go through the inquiry and then arrive at a conclusion and that conclusion, one needs to develop a certainty in relation to the conclusion.

Third, the negation that is involved has to be categorical. The self that is being negated has to be a categorical negation, which we talked about earlier. Technically that form of negation is

known as non-implicative negation, in other words, in that negation there is nothing left of "ifs" and "ands" or "buts." It's a simple negation of self—full stop. Period.

That's the structure of that ascertainment.

[My summary: Structure of ascertainment of emptiness

1. Conscious awareness of emptiness
2. Certainty, a conclusive state of mind
3. It is a thorough non-implicative negation]

Then Tsongkhapa says that to a large extent, the real change, impact, through meditation on emptiness really comes from ever better improvement in the quality of one's ascertainment. It's a really a function of the quality of ascertainment that [determines] if one's meditation on emptiness gets improved.

This ascertainment, at the initial beginner's stage is ascertainment of emptiness through concept, through inferential cognition. Here, emptiness is understood primarily through a generic concept, but still it is an understanding of emptiness and it has all these qualities of being certain, being conclusive, and being categorical and comprehensive in one's negation. This is the only way that beginners can have access to emptiness. Of course, eventually this can culminate in the direct realization of emptiness such as in that of the aryas' gnosis in meditative equipoise, but for beginners, that's the only medium through which we can really have access to emptiness.

Let me cite from Tsongkhapa when he talks about the role of this ascertainment. He writes in the insight section of the Lamrim Chenmo:

> *To the extent that one cultivates the ascertainment, that certainty is seen to become stronger, more enduring, clearer, and more stable. [Dharmakirti's] Exposition of Valid Cognition says:*
>
> > *Ascertainment and the thought that distorts*
> > *have the nature of being the opponent and that which is opposed.*
>
> *Thus, as the opposing force and what is being opposed, to the extent that one's ascertainment becomes stable and forceful, to that extent it undermines that which is its opposite. Here too we must optimize the stability of one's ascertainment of the lack of intrinsic existence; this also needs to be done through contemplating numerous refutations and proofs."*
>
> *Je Tsongkhapa – Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path, Vol.III, 20*[17]

[17] In the Snow Lion translation by Joshua Cutler, this is found on p341 and is a slightly different English translation

He connects ascertainment with certainty,[18] the certainty that there is no inherent existence. In other words, what he is saying is that to the extent your ascertainment becomes clearer, more enduring, and sharper, to that extent it will have a greater impact to oppose its opposite force, which is the grasping. The quality of emptiness meditation is, to a large extent, [based on] the quality of the level of your ascertainment. How long can you maintain that, how clear it is, and how sharp it is. That's an important point. He is saying that the real change in our worldview, in our outlook, through meditation on emptiness, will come from refinement of our ascertainment through meditation, formal sitting as well as application in everyday life.

Although this ascertainment in the initial stage is developed primarily through a method of inquiry and analysis leading to finding the view, but he says that it is only through prolonged meditation practice, formal sitting, that this ascertainment can be transformed into genuine insight. Here we're talking about vipashyana, genuine insight into emptiness.

Now to give a flavor of what he means by ascertainment and the certainty that goes with it, Tsongkhapa uses some unique phrases which then later came to be adopted by other thinkers including non-Gelug thinkers as well. For example, he uses a Tibetan phrase called pu tak chö pa (W: phu thag chod pa). This can be translated as conclusive certainty, but the term conjures the image of someone who is looking for the source of a stream and having finally found it. It's a conclusive end kind of idea. He uses phrases like, for example *the view endowed with conclusive certainty* with respect to the truth of the way things are, yin luk pu tak chö pé tawa (W: yin lugs phu thag chod pa'i lta ba). Another phrase, *the profound view endowed with conclusive certainty*, zap mö dön la pu tak chö pa (W: zab mo'i don la phu thag chod pa). *A view of emptiness endowed with conclusive certainty*, tong nyi kyi tawa pu tak chö pa (W: stong nyid kyi lta ba phu thag chod pa). *Wisdom endowed with conclusive certainty* with respect to the way things are, yin luk pu tak chö pé shé rap (W: yin lugs phu thag chod pa'i shes rab). For example, this is the phrase he uses in his experiential song, *Lines on the Stages of the Path*.

These phrases really convey this idea of a certain ascertainment that is endowed with a quality of certainty. There's a kind of conclusive certainty. Even though initially, as we meditate on emptiness, the certainty ascertainment may come and go and the quality of certainty may not be very strong, but as you continue in your practice, not only in formal sitting but also in post-meditation periods applying in your everyday life and beginning to view everything you perceive from the perspective of emptiness, then he's saying that the quality of certainty in our ascertainment of the view will really come to increase, get reinforced.

That, I think, is an important teaching because even from my own personal experience, I know to the extent one is able to apply the insight of emptiness to everyday life, to that extent, you have a sense of freedom because you invest less. You are grasping less and to the extent your

[18] For an interesting presentation of ascertainment and certainty, albeit from a different lineage, see John Petit's translation of Mipham's *Beacon of Certainty*, chapter 7 entitled, "Ascertainment (nges pa) and Certainty (nges shes): Some Conclusions"

grasping is lesser, to that extent you become less vulnerable and feel hurt. I think there is a real connection between to what extent your grasping is strong and to what extent you are vulnerable to emotional reaction and contrast that with to what extent you have been able to liberate yourself from levels of grasping to that freedom you experience. There's a quality of resiliency to the mind that emerges the more you are able to apply emptiness, your understanding, whatever degree of understanding of emptiness you have to everyday life. That seems to be actually quite true. This is what Tsongkhapa is really getting at. That's what he means by ascertainment and the role of certainty that goes with it.

What Culmination Feels like

Let me cite four important stanzas from Tsongkhapa's verse text known as *Three Principal Elements of the Path*, which is a very famous text on lamrim, stages of the path, which Tsongkhapa wrote originally as a form of a letter to one of his very very early students, Tsakho Ngawang Drakpa who returned to the eastern part of Tibet. These four verses actually present what it feels like to have found the view and there is a key phrase used there which I've used for the name of this particular lesson, *the culmination of the analysis of the view*. There is this idea that part of your inquiry into emptiness and meditation on emptiness is a process of inquiry even when you are formally sitting, you are involved in a process of inquiry and that process of inquiry or analysis searching for the view will finally come to a point where that search would culminate. A bit like Nagarjuna's point about finally silencing the chatter of conceptual elaboration.

> *When, with respect to all phenomena of samsara and nirvana,*
> *you see that cause and effect never deceive their laws,*
> *and then dismantle all the focuses of objectification,*
> *then you have entered the path that pleases the buddhas.*

In other words, he's explaining that whatever phenomena that you relate to, that you perceive, whether it is from samsara or nirvana, the moment you see them, the moment you perceive phenomena, you immediately recognize the law of causality, cause and effect is never violated, and then in relation to them, on your part, there is no urge or tendency to now grasp. In fact, your perception of the world itself offers you a space so that there is no basis left for objectification. He says when that happens, then you have entered the path that pleases the buddhas. In other words, when that happens you are moving towards true understanding of emptiness.

Then Tsongkhapa describes this further:

> *As long as the two understandings—*
> *of appearance, undeceiving dependent origination,*
> *and of emptiness, devoid of theses—remain separate,*
> *then you have not realized the intent of the Sage.*

In other words, when your perspectives on everyday reality, conventional truth, and when your understanding of emptiness, which is the ultimate truth, remain separate, for that long you have not realized the intent of the Sage. To the extent that your perception of the conventional truth and your perception of the ultimate truth remain independent of each other, they are unconnected, so long you have not realized the Buddha's true intent of the teaching.

In other words, Tsongkhapa is here implying that the true understanding of emptiness would emerge when emptiness is understood in terms of dependent origination, as the same. This is what Nagarjuna meant. The meaning of the word emptiness is dependent origination. For most of us, we tend to see them as two separate things. But Tsongkhapa is saying that so long as they remain separate in our mind, we haven't found the true intent of the Buddha. Then he goes on:

> *However, at some point when without alternation but at once,*
> *the instant you see that dependent origination is undeceiving,*
> *if, in your ascertainment, the entire object of grasping is dismantled,*
> *at that point your analysis of the view has culminated.*

What he is saying is that the moment you perceive the world of dependent origination, at that very moment, if the force of that simple recognition / perception of dependent origination immediately gives rise to dismantling of all your grasping, then, he says, at that point, the process of analysis has come to an end.

In other words, he is saying the process of analysis has come to an end when emptiness finally arises in terms of dependent origination. There is an equation between the two.

> *Furthermore, when appearance dispels the extreme of existence*
> *and emptiness dispels the extreme of non-existence,*
> *and if you understand how emptiness arises as cause and effect,*
> *you will never be captivated by views grasping at extremes.*

Furthermore, he says that generally it is the appearance aspect that would prevent you from sliding into nihilism and it's the emptiness aspect that prevents you from sliding into eternalism. But in fact here, when your understanding of emptiness has reached quite deep, he says even the appearance itself will dispel the extreme of existence and emptiness itself will dispel the extremes of nihilism. The opposite happens here. Also, when emptiness itself arises as cause and effect, then you are no longer vulnerable to being captivated by views tending towards extremes.

Here, the question is, "Is the culmination of the analysis of the view the same as realization of emptiness or is the culmination of the analysis of the view subsequent to the realization of emptiness?" On this question, Gelug commentators have tended to have divergent opinions, but my own sense is that realization of emptiness is probably prior because realization of emptiness takes place as a result or consequence of inferential cognition through reasoning and then once that realization takes place, then you begin to have a different perspective on the

conventional world. Then, in the light of your realization of emptiness, you view the conventional world, then the very perception of dependent origination instantly gives rise to awareness of emptiness.

So, I think the culmination of the analysis of the view is probably subsequent, but it's not that far, it comes more naturally after, and I think there is a combination of both perception of the external reality as well as awareness of emptiness. There is an illusionlike character, quality, to that perception when the culmination happens.

Some commentators tend to take understanding emptiness in terms of dependent origination and understanding dependent origination in terms of emptiness as two stages, but my own sense is that they're probably synonymous. When you understand emptiness in terms of dependent origination, naturally you would also understand dependent origination in terms of emptiness. But I think the culmination of the view arises more as an application of the insight into emptiness, realization of emptiness to the perception of everyday world, in the subsequent stage.

One of the phrases that Tsongkhapa has used here is *emptiness itself arising as both cause and effect*. This is an important point and sometimes this phrase of emptiness arising as cause and effect is interpreted, including by many influential Gelug commentators, as suggesting that when you have a genuine realization of emptiness then it supports the understanding of cause and effect. It lends a basis for a robust support of understanding the world of cause and effect. I personally feel that Tsongkhapa is making a stronger statement. He seems to be saying that when you have reached a deep understanding of emptiness, you will come to recognize emptiness as the final explanation for everything. Emptiness is what makes everything possible. This is similar to what Nagarjuna says:

> *For whom emptiness is possible,*
> *Everything is possible.*
> *For whom emptiness is not possible,*
> *Nothing is possible.*
>
> *- Nagarjuna - Root Verses on the Middle Way, 24:14*

[With respect to] *cause* here [in the phrase emptiness itself arising as both cause and effect], I don't think Tsongkhapa means cause in a production sense, but cause as an explanatory cause, as an explanation. He is saying that when you truly understand the meaning of emptiness, when you understand the truth of emptiness, you will come to recognize that emptiness is the final explanation for everything.

Emptiness arising as an effect, I think again Tsongkhapa is pointing to the fact that when you come to recognize emptiness is a meaningful way, you will also come to recognize that awareness of emptiness, realization of emptiness is the culmination of all of your perspectives. When you perceive the world of cause and effect, you keep inquiring into what is its nature,

how are things possible? If you look at all the various phenomena and you keep delving deeper and deeper into their nature, you will end up, you will culminate in the awareness of emptiness. That's the final end.

This is what Chandrakirti probably means also when he says conventional truth is the means and the ultimate truth is its end. It is through the conventional truth, understanding of conventional truth, when you keep pushing and pushing and pushing, inquiring ever deeper, you are going to end up, culminate, in the final truth which is emptiness. I think Tsongkhapa, when he says emptiness itself arises as both cause and effect, he doesn't use the word both but he says *if you understand how emptiness arises as cause and effect*, I think he means both cause and effect. If we read it this way, there is something quite rich in this phraseology, this phrase that emptiness arises as cause and effect.

One of the reasons why I read it this way is supported by a phrase that Tsongkhapa uses in one of his scrolls that he shares with Rendawa based on Manjushri's instruction where Tsongkhapa in fact talks about emptiness itself arising as cause and effect. I think this cause and effect here probably has a deeper understanding of the explanatory principle.

[The section I believe Dr. Jinpa is citing from is found in his text *Tsongkhapa*, in the subsection titled "Correspondence with Rendawa on the View":

> *In general, it is common to all philosophical schools, right down to the Cārvāka [Indian materialist school], that emptiness dispels the extreme of existence and appearance the extreme of nonexistence. A distinctive feature of Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka, however, is that appearance dispels the extreme of existence and emptiness the extreme of nonexistence; one understands how emptiness becomes [both] the cause as well as the effect. One thus accepts within one's own standpoint that effects arise in dependence upon their causes and that effects invariably follow their causes.]*

In any case, at the heart of the culmination of the view is really this equation between emptiness and dependent origination. Tsongkhapa in his *Ocean of Reasoning* which is a commentary on Nagarjuna's *Treatise on the Middle Way*, says that when Nagarjuna talks about the equation between emptiness and dependent origination, he is not saying the word dependent origination has as its content the meaning of emptiness. Nor is he saying that the word emptiness has as part of its meaning dependent origination. He says that equation truly arises only in the mind of someone who has realized emptiness. It's for the Madhyamika, it's not so much a linguistic point, it's really about coming to realization as a result of deep inquiry into the meaning of both dependent origination and emptiness.

When trying to flesh out what is meant by the phrase *culmination of the analysis of the view*, there is a phrase that is quite memorable captured in one of Tsongkhapa's conversations with Manjushri that is presented in Tsongkhapa's secret biography written by Khedrup Je. It presents a measure of what it means to culminate the analysis of the view. He says:

There remains no sense of unease following the conclusion one has arrived at with respect to a given point.

Khedrup Je - Tsongkhapa's Secret Biography

In other words, once you reach the culmination of the analysis of the view, in relation to that point, the conclusion you have arrived at, there remains no sense of unease on your part. There's a kind of conclusiveness to that certainty which I think quite beautifully captures the point that Tsongkhapa is trying to make.

I've briefly outlined the steps involved in what it means to engage in meditation practice, especially on the beginner's stage from cultivating the intellectual understanding, then cultivating the ability to have some stability of the mind through shamatha type practice, and then finally engaging in actual meditation by following the four steps or four key points of identifying the object of negation, logical entailment, absence of identity, and absence of difference. Then I also spoke about how the role of ascertainment is important to be appreciated and the connection between ascertainment and certainty and how when finally one has found the view, there will be a conclusive sense of certainty and that certainty will also manifest in the form of kind of an equation between dependent origination and emptiness.

Emptiness in Sutra and Tantra

One of the important things that we have to remember in the context of Tsongkhapa's understanding of emptiness is that insofar as emptiness itself is concerned, Tsongkhapa is very clear, there is no difference between sutra and tantra. Sometimes in the Tibetan religion, there is a tendency to suggest that the vajrayana presents something deeper, a more advanced level of emptiness. For Tsongkhapa, that's not the case. In this, Tsongkhapa is in total agreement with Sakya Pandita. Sakya Pandita in fact says that if the presentation of emptiness in the Madhyamaka treatises is not the final view, that would mean that the Madhyamaka's view of emptiness involves conceptual elaboration because emptiness by their very definition must be free from conceptual elaboration. Sakya Pandita says that there is no subtler or higher level of emptiness in Vajrayana compared to what is found in the Madhyamaka treatises and Tsongkhapa is exactly the same here.

Where Vajrayana's superiority emerges is really in the context of the meditating mind. In non-Vajrayana contexts, such as what we have described so far, the meditating mind that is used is the conscious level of intellect that we are using through attentional development, through conscious paying attention, through application of meta-awareness, whereas in Vajrayana, especially in the completion stage practice, the meditating mind is a subtle level of consciousness. It's a subtle level of consciousness arrived at, or brought about, or induced by progressive dissolution of the winds into the central channel quietening not just conscious thought processes and sensory activity, but also the energy within the body so that natural luminosity of the mind comes to shine and what is referred to the primordial mind or primordial wisdom or innate mind, nyuk mé yé shé (W: gnyug ma'i ye shes) or lhen kyé kyi yé

shé (W: lhan skyes kyi ye shes) comes to arise. When the subtle level of consciousness arises, it is naturally tinged with the quality of blissful state. Bliss is a character of a subtle level of consciousness. Not only that, but also such a blissful subtle level of consciousness tends to engage with their object, emptiness, in a completely nondual manner as if the meditating mind is fused with emptiness. It assumes emptiness.

Therefore, Tsongkhapa says that the real uniqueness and superiority of emptiness meditation in the tantric context emerges not from the fact that there is a deeper level of truth being discovered or deeper more advanced level of understanding of emptiness arises, but it is where the meditating mind, the subject, is very advanced. So, the meditation on emptiness takes place at a much subtler level of consciousness where many of the conceptual elaborations that normally block our conscious mind of the intellect no longer function there. That, I think, is really important to keep in mind and therefore, in vajrayana meditation on emptiness takes a different kind of practice including preceded by the guru yoga and deity yoga practice of dissolution of our ordinary identity and perception of self and person and then assuming the identity of the deity. All of these are preparatory stages for entering into deep meditation on emptiness according to the vajrayana tradition, which we are not going to talk about here. The key point is that insofar as the object, emptiness that is being realized is concerned, it's the same emptiness that is presented in the Perfection of Wisdom sutras, that is developed further and more explicitly in Nagarjuna's writings, and commented upon further by Chandrakirti and Tsongkhapa. There is no difference when it comes to emptiness, but there is a difference when it comes to the mind meditating on emptiness. That's an important difference.

This advanced level of meditation on emptiness, particularly in the completion stage, takes place at the subtle-most level of consciousness which is sometimes described as primordial mind, nyuk sem tra mo (W: gnyug sems phra mo) or innate gnosis, lhen kyé kyi yé shé (W: lhan skyes kyi ye shes). Tsongkhapa actually says that comparing emptiness meditation according to non-vajrayana practice on the beginner's stage that we discussed so far and that of the advanced yogi on the completion stage is like trying to compare the space between the open sky and the space on the face of our palm. He says that there's just simply no comparison and because there is no comparison, the impact on grasping will also be hugely different. I think that's important to keep in mind.

Conclusion and Key Points

Let me conclude by listing some of the key points that we discussed in this class.

- Meditation on emptiness involves first and foremost a process of negation, a process of undoing the construct of our delusory mind as created in relation to reality.

- At the core of this deconstruction is the deconstruction of the assumed notion of intrinsic existence. Intrinsic existence is not just one thing. We have many layers that reinforce that construction.

- Emptiness meditation requires a skillful approach that balances both the resting meditation and discursive analytic meditation. It requires both resting meditation as well as discursive analytic meditation.

- At the beginner's stage, one of the most widely used methods is to frame one's meditation on emptiness in terms of the ascertainment of the four key points, identifying the object of negation, logical entailment, and so on.

- Of the four key points, the most important one is the first one, identifying the object of negation. The success or failure of this determines the quality of one's emptiness meditation.

- The process of identifying the object of negation involves first and foremost, a process of careful, critical self-inquiry probing how one's views, one's own personal identity in terms of "I am" and "mine."

- When a genuine equation arises in one's understanding of emptiness and dependent origination, one implying the other in a mutually reinforcing way, then one has reached the culmination of the analysis into the view.

- When one's understanding of emptiness is refined through prolonged meditation rooted firmly in attainment of tranquil abiding, it will culminate in a perfect union of shamatha and vipashyana, tranquil abiding and insight. More advanced meditation on emptiness takes place in the completion stage of tantra when the yogi is able to unite the innate blissful mind with emptiness in a nondual manner as water is poured into water. At that stage there is no need for any further discursive analysis in one's emptiness meditation.

With that, our final lesson is complete. I hope the course that we have gone together will really help you and provide a guidepost for engaging deeper with Tsongkhapa's major writings on Madhyamaka, especially the five major texts. I would also recommend that in terms of actual practical application of your understanding of emptiness into your meditation practice, then it's also helpful to consult his shorter texts such as his Guide to the View which is in his collected writings as well. I hope you enjoyed the course and you will benefit from this.

Thank you.

Verses for Meditation Practice

Opening reflective practice

Meditation on the three elements of dedication

བསྔོ་བའི་འགྲེར་གསུམ་མི་དམིགས་པ་བསྒོམ་པ།

What is being dedicated—the virtue

The act of dedicating—the action

The person who is doing the dedication—the agent

By ensuring that all this remains unsullied
by the stains of the eight mundane concerns,
and by understanding all things as illusions,
may I be free from the bondage of clinging.

– from Eight Verses of Mind Training

དེ་དག་ཀུན་ཉོང་ཚོས་བཞུད་ཀྱི། །རྟོག་པའི་དྲི་མས་མ་བསླད་པར།།
ཚོས་ཀུན་སྒྱུ་མར་ཤེས་པའི་སྒོས། །ཞེན་མེད་འཆིང་བ་ལས་གྲོལ་ཤོག།