

Middle Way Teachings

Appearance and Reality

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By Geshe Namdak

Reality of Emptiness

In the *Three Principal Aspects of the Path* Lama Tsong Khapa mentions the need for realizing reality:

Without the wisdom realizing ultimate reality,
Even though having generated renunciation or the mind of enlightenment
One cannot cut the root cause of samsara.
Therefore, make effort in the method to realize dependent arising.

Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way

(Skt: Mûlamadhyamakakârikâ, Tib: Tsawa sherab)

By Arya Nagarjuna

CHAPTER 18, EXAMINATION OF SELF AND PHENOMENON

1. If the self were the aggregates,
It would have arising and ceasing (as properties).
If it were different from the aggregates,
It would not have the characteristics of the aggregates.
2. If there were no self,
Where would the self's (possessions) be?
From the pacification of the self and what belongs to it,
One is freed from grasping onto 'I' and 'mine'.
3. One who does not grasp onto 'I' and 'mine',
That one does not exist.
One who views non-grasping onto 'I' and 'mine'
He does not perceive (the reality).
4. When views of 'I' and 'mine' are extinguished,
Whether with respect to the internal or external,
The appropriator ceases.
This having ceased, birth ceases.
5. Ceasing of action and affliction leads to Nirvana.
Action and affliction come from conceptual thought.
This comes from (mental) elaboration.
Elaboration ceases through emptiness.
6. That there is a self has been taught,
And the doctrine of no-self,
By the Buddhas, as well as the

Doctrine of neither self nor non-self.

7. What language expresses is non-existent.
The apprehension of mind is non-existent.
(Because of being) unarisen and unceased, like Nirvana
Is the nature of things.
8. Everything is real and is not real,
Both real and not real,
Neither real nor not real.
This, the Lord Buddha taught accordingly.
Neither nihilism nor eternalism.
9. Not dependent upon another, peaceful and
Not elaborated by elaboration,
Not thought, without distinctions,
These are the characteristics of thatness.
10. Whatever comes into being, dependent upon another,
Is not identical to that thing.
Nor is it different from it.
Therefore it is neither nihilistic nor eternalistic.
11. This nectar of the teachings
Of the Buddhas, patrons of the world,
Is (understood as) without identity, without distinction,
Neither nihilism nor eternalism.
12. When the fully enlightened ones do not appear,
And when the Hearers have disappeared,
The wisdom of self-enlightenment
Will arise completely without dependence.

Colophon of chapter 18 of *Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*: English translation by Geshe Dorji Damdul, used with permission from Tibet House, Cultural Centre of H. H. the Dalai Lama, New Delhi, for Geshe Tenzin Namdak's Nalanda Talks, April 2021.

Reason of Either One with or Different From

The following analysis is based on the first two reasons of Chandrakīrti's seven-fold reasoning¹ using the example of a chariot. In his *Mādhyamakāvatāra* he mentions:

“A chariot is neither asserted to be [inherently] other than its parts, nor to be [inherently] non-other.”

- The first step is recognizing how the self appears to one's consciousness, recognizing the object of negation or sometimes called the object of negation. It appears in an independent manner, as being separate from body and mind, existing from its own side. This appearance of a concrete self is especially evident at times when destructive emotions like anger and

¹ The sevenfold reasoning of Chandrakīrti is based on that the (inherent appearing) chariot is not 1) one or 2) different from its parts, 3) doesn't possess its parts, 4) the parts don't inherently depend upon the chariot, 5) the chariot doesn't inherently depend on its parts, 6) the mere collection is not the chariot, and 7) the shape of the collection is not the chariot. These reasons are applied to proof the selflessness of a person.

attachment arise. At these times there is a strong apprehension of a concrete "I" and "mine".

- The second step analyses the truth that if a concrete self exists as it appears, it must be either one with or different from body and mind; there is no other possibility.
- The third step establishes that this mistakenly appearing self cannot be one with body and mind. If it were one with the body and mind, then the self should be multiple since the body and mind are multiple. The *Mādhyamakāvatāra* says:
"If the aggregates [of body and mind] were the self, then since there are many aggregates, the self would also be many."
- The fourth step establishes that the concretely appearing self cannot be inherently different from body and mind. If it were inherently different from body and mind, how could an interdependent relationship exist between the conventional self and body and mind? The *Mādhyamakāvatāra* says:
"There is no [inherent] self, other than the aggregates because without the aggregates, it is not apprehended."
- Based on the previous reasons, the fifth step concludes that an inherently established or concrete "I" cannot exist. One focuses upon this conclusion for some time and familiarizes one's mind with this understanding of the ultimate reality of the self. Following this insight, one concludes that the self is a mere imputation upon the aggregates of body and mind in a nature of dependent origination. Through this one finds the view of the middle way; Nāgārjuna says in his *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*:
"Whatever is dependently originated, that is explained to be emptiness, that [emptiness reflects] dependent designation, this indeed is the middle way."

The above method for the meditation on selflessness can be applied to how to meditate on selflessness of other schools of Buddhist Philosophy as well. When describing how to recognize the object of negation, one should focus on how this object is described in a particular school. After this one can follow a similar form of logic as described above, by analyzing that if that particular self exists, it should be one or different from the aggregates and so forth. And thus one can realize selflessness according to a particular school with a similar form of logic that has been given here.

Reason of Dependent-Origination

Next to the reason of "either one with or different from", mentioned above, the *Mādhyamakāvatāra* also explains the reason of dependent origination. This reason is sometimes called the "King of Reasons" because through the understanding of dependent origination a practitioner can avoid the two extremes of eternalism and nihilism and easily reach an understanding of the complete final view. The understanding of 'dependence' helps avoid the extreme of eternalism and the understanding of 'origination' helps avoid the extreme of nihilism.

Dependent origination is commonly divided into three levels of subtlety:

1. The dependent-origination of arising in dependence on causes and conditions. This level of dependent-origination of impermanent phenomena is accepted by all four schools of Buddhist Philosophy.
2. The dependent-origination of being established in dependence on parts and basis of imputation.
 - The dependent-origination of arising in dependence on parts or basis of imputation of impermanent phenomena. Nominally existent impermanent phenomena are accepted by all four schools of Buddhist Philosophy. Nominally existent things need imputation such as a vase, which arises in dependence on the different parts of the vase such as the flat base, round belly and so on and the basis of imputation which is the collection of the parts.

- The dependent-origination being mentally imputed in dependence on the parts or basis of imputation of all phenomena. This is accepted only by the Mādhyamika Schools. The three other schools mention that dependent originated phenomena need to be impermanent. Nominally-existent phenomena, both impermanent (like a nominally-existent person) and permanent (like un compounded space) exist as being imputed on their parts and basis of designation. For example a person is imputed on its parts, the aggregates, and the basis of designation which is the (mere) collection of the five aggregates. Un compounded space is imputed on its parts, the space in each one of its directions, and its basis of designation which is the (mere) collection of its parts.
3. Prāsaṅgika- Mādhyamika school has two uncommon explanations of dependent-origination:
- The dependent-origination of mutual dependence. All phenomena are merely nominally-existent and therefore their nature is that of something which is imputed/labeled, and therefore it is dependent on the labeling process. Just as the result is dependent on the cause, the cause is also dependent on the result since it is imputed as something that produces the result. If the result did not exist, the cause could also not exist, since the nature of the cause is something which produces its own result.
 - The dependent-origination of all phenomena being merely labeled by a name or conceptual mind in dependence on its basis of imputation. As Nāgārjuna says in his Mūlamadhyamakakārikā:
 “Whatever is dependently originated, that is explained to be emptiness, that [emptiness reflects] dependent designation, this indeed is the middle way.”
 The understanding that all phenomena are merely labeled by a conceptual consciousness and have no inherent existence is the most subtle level of dependent origination that is accepted only by the Prāsaṅgika- Mādhyamika school of thought. This level of dependent origination is considered to be subtle conventional reality and can only be realized after one realizes the ultimate reality of emptiness.

Generating the Right View

Here are four verses from the *Three Principal Aspects of the Path*² explaining how one knows one has generated the correct understanding of emptiness.

Showing the Right View

[10] One who sees the cause and effect of all phenomena
 Of both cyclic existence and the state beyond sorrow as forever unbetraying,
 And for whom any object trusted in by the grasping mind has completely disappeared,
 Has at that time entered the path pleasing the Buddhas.

The Definition of Not Having Completed the Analysis of the Right View

[11] If the appearance of dependent relation,
 Which is unbetraying, is accepted separately from emptiness,
 And as long as they are seen as separate,
 Then one has still not realized the Buddha’s intent.

The Definition of Having Completed the Analysis of Right View

[12] If [these two realizations] are happening simultaneously without alternation,
 And from merely seeing dependent relation as completely unbetraying
 The definite ascertainment comes that completely destroys
 The way all objects are apprehended [as truly existent],

² These verses were translated by Lama Zopa Rinpoche, © 2010 FPMT Inc., All rights reserved.

At that time the analysis of the ultimate view is complete.

The Particular Special Quality of the Prāsaṅgika View

[13] Furthermore, appearance eliminates the extreme of existence
And emptiness eliminates the extreme of non-existence.
If you realize how emptiness manifests in the manner of cause and effect
Then you are not captivated by wrong notions holding extreme view.

Illusory Appearances

In Praise of Dependent Origination:

Therefore, whatever originates dependently,
Though primordially free of inherent existence,
Appears as having inherent existence,
So, you thought all this to be like an illusion.

In the *Great Exposition of the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*, Lama Tsongkhapa mentions very clearly that illusory appearance can only arise in the mind of persons who over a period of habituation with a strong analytical meditation on emptiness, emptiness being a non-affirming negative and appearing like the sky, illusory appearance arises when the meditator comes out of that meditation and conventional reality like form and so forth appears. No other methods are indicated. On the contrary not having realized emptiness, and meditations on subtle conventional aspects of the mind will not produce an illusory like appearance. Prolonged meditations on these subtle aspects of conventional reality might produce a hazy or misty (ban bun) appearance when stopping the meditation, but that is not an illusory appearance. With an illusory appearance, things appear inherently but one is able to see them as an illusion, one realizes that they do not exist the way they appear. Before realizing emptiness contemplating illusory appearances, with one's understanding of emptiness, can have great benefits that can deepen one's understanding of emptiness and the actual nature of the conventional world around us.

The Sutra Teachings Explained the Hearers:

Form [aggregate] is like thick foam [on an ocean]
Feeling is like a water bubble,
Discrimination is like a mirage,
Compositional factors are like plantain trees,
Consciousness is like an Illusion.

Dimond Cutter Sutra:

A star, a visual aberration, a flame of a butter lamp,
An illusion, a dew drop, a water bubble,
A dream, lightning, a cloud:
See all compounded phenomena like this.

Meeting Father and Son Sutra:

It has been stated in the scriptures:
On a perfect flawless mirror
The reflections of a form appear.
Having no inherent reality.
Understand all phenomena in the same manner.