

Realizing Emptiness

Celebrating Lama Tsong Khapa's Legacy

**Geshe Tenzin Namdak
Jamyang Buddhist Centre**

The material of this course consists of two texts: In Praise of Dependent Origination by Lama Tsong Khapa and this text.

In order to understand the ultimate reality of emptiness, one first has to know the two truths: conventional and ultimate truth. The two truths are a very important part of our path to enlightenment. Through a thorough ascertainment of the two truths, one understands how the ignorance of grasping at a self gives rise to attachment, anger and other afflictive emotions and karma which produce contaminated rebirth of suffering samsara. By correctly analyzing the two truths and in particular with the ascertainment of the ultimate truth one generates the wisdom which eliminates ignorance, the root of samsara, and leads one to the bliss of nirvana and enlightenment. On the basis of understanding the two truths, one gains confidence in the four noble truths, thereby developing a firm faith of conviction in the Buddha's teachings. In the *Three Principal Aspects of the Path* Lama Tsong Khapa also 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.

Without the correct understanding of the different types of selflessness described in the four schools of Buddhist philosophy, it will be difficult to grasp the real meaning of ultimate reality. First the definitions of the two truths in the four schools will be given followed by an overview of the definitions and divisions. After this a simplified way of meditating on selflessness will be described using the reasons of one with or different from and of dependent-origination. At the conclusion four verses from the *Three Principal Aspects of the Path* are given explaining how one knows one has generated the correct understanding of the two truths.

The Four Buddhist Schools¹

Below is a short summary explaining the two truths according to the four schools of Buddhist philosophy.

Great Exposition School (*Skt. Vaibhasika*)

The definition of a conventional truth is: a phenomenon such that an awareness apprehending it is cancelled if it is broken up or mentally separated into its individual parts.

¹ This section with the definitions of the two truths and the way of ascertaining selflessness is taken from *Presentation of Tenets*, by Jetsun Chokyi Gyaltsen, Translated by Glen Svenson, © 2005 Glen Svenson, All rights reserved. It is reproduced for the use in the FPMT Basic Program with permission from the translator. All the other material is compiled by Geshe Tenzin Namdak.

Illustrations of conventional truths are, for example, a vase and a woollen cloth because if a vase is broken with a hammer, the mind apprehending it is cancelled, and if a woollen cloth is separated into its individual threads, the mind apprehending it is cancelled.

The definition of an ultimate truth is: A phenomenon such that an awareness apprehending it is not cancelled if it is broken up or mentally separated into its individual parts.

Illustrations of ultimate truths are, for example, directionally partless particles, temporally partless moments of consciousness, and uncompounded phenomena.

Way of asserting selflessness

Subtle selflessness and subtle selflessness of persons are asserted to be equivalent. A selflessness of phenomena is not accepted because it is accepted that if it is an established base it is necessarily a self of phenomena. Among them, the Followers of Vatsiputra, one of the eighteen sub-schools, accept a selflessness of person that is a person being empty of being permanent, unitary, and independent. However, they do not accept a selflessness of person that is a person being empty of being self-sufficient substantially existent because they accept a self-sufficient substantially existent self that is inexpressible even in terms of being one entity with or a different entity from the aggregates, and being permanent or impermanent.

Sutra School (*Skt. Sautrantika*)

The definition of an ultimate truth is: a phenomenon that is ultimately able to perform a function.

This is according to the Followers of Reasoning. The Followers of Scripture assert the two truths in the same way as the Proponents of the Great Exposition.

Ultimate truth, truly existent, thing, product, impermanent phenomenon, compounded phenomenon, substance, and specifically characterized phenomenon are equivalent.

The definition of a conventional truth is: a phenomenon that is not ultimately able to perform a function.

Conventional truth, falsely existent, permanent phenomenon, and generally characterized phenomenon are equivalent.

Way of asserting selflessness

The person being empty of being permanent, unitary, and independent is asserted to be a coarse selflessness of persons and the person being empty of being self-sufficient substantially existent is asserted to be the subtle selflessness of persons. They are similar to the Proponents of the Great Exposition in not accepting a selflessness of phenomena.

Mind Only School (*Skt. Cittamatra*)

The definition of an ultimate truth is: that which is realized by the direct valid cognizer directly realizing it by way of the vanishing of dualistic appearance.

Ultimate truth, final reality, sphere of reality, and final mode of abiding are equivalent.

There are two divisions of ultimate truths:

- subtle selflessness of phenomena
- subtle selflessness of persons.

Illustrations of the subtle selflessness of phenomena are, for example, the emptiness that is a form and the valid cognizer apprehending that form being empty of being different substances and the emptiness that is a form being empty of existing by way of its own characteristics as a basis for applying the term 'form.'

An illustration of the subtle selflessness of persons is, for example, the emptiness that is a person being empty of being self-sufficient substantially existent.

The definition of a conventional truth is: that which is realized by the direct valid cognizer directly realizing it by way of being together with dualistic appearance.

There are two types of conventional truths:

- other-powered phenomena and
- conventional truths that are included in imputational constructs.

Other-powered phenomena and compounded phenomena are equivalent.

Conventional truths that are included in imputational constructs and uncompounded phenomena other than ultimate truths are equivalent.

Way of asserting selflessness

The way of positing illustrations of the coarse and subtle selflessness of persons is similar to the Autonomists and below. An illustration of the selflessness of phenomena is, for example, the emptiness that is a form and the valid cognizer apprehending that form being empty of being different substances.

Autonomy School (*Skt. Svatantrika*)

Ultimate truth, final reality, and the subtle selflessness of phenomena are equivalent.

Way of asserting selflessness

The person being empty of being permanent, unitary, and independent is asserted to be a coarse selflessness of persons, while the person being empty of being self-sufficient substantially existent is a subtle selflessness of persons. Yogic Middle Way Autonomists assert that a form and the cognizer apprehending that form being empty of being different substances is a coarse selflessness of phenomena. All phenomena being empty of true existence is asserted to be the subtle selflessness of phenomena.

The two subtle selflessnesses are differentiated by way of the object of negation and not by way of the basis of the emptiness because the refutation of the object of negation – true existence – upon the basis of a person is the subtle selflessness of phenomena, while the refutation of self-sufficient substantial existence upon the basis of a person is the subtle selflessness of persons. The two conceptions of self are differentiated by way of the mode of apprehension and not by way of the observed object because through observing the basis – the person – and apprehending it to be truly existent it is a conception of a self of phenomena, and through observing the basis – the person – and apprehending it to be self-sufficient substantially existent it is a conception of a self of persons.

Consequence School (*Skt. Prasangika*)

The definition of being a conventional truth is: an object that is found by a valid cognizer analyzing a conventionality and with respect to which that valid cognizer analyzing the conventionality becomes a valid cognizer analyzing a conventionality.

The definition of being an ultimate truth is: an object found by a valid cognizer analyzing the ultimate and with respect to which that valid cognizer analyzing the ultimate becomes a valid cognizer analyzing the ultimate.

Way of asserting selflessness

The person being empty of being self-sufficient substantially existent is asserted to be a coarse selflessness of persons and the person being empty of true existence is asserted to be the subtle selflessness of persons.

The two subtle selflessnesses are differentiated by way of the basis of emptiness and not by way of the object of negation because the refutation of the object of negation – true

existence - upon the basis of a person is the subtle selflessness of persons, and the refutation of the object of negation - true existence – upon the basis of the aggregates and so forth is the subtle selflessness of phenomena.

The two subtle conceptions of self are differentiated by way of the observed object and not by way of the mode of apprehension because observing the basis - the person – and apprehending it to be truly existent is posited as the subtle conception of a self of persons, and observing the basis of imputation – the aggregates and so forth – and apprehending it to be truly existent is posited as the subtle conception of a self of phenomena.

Overview of Selflessness in the Schools of Buddhist Philosophy

The sutras which constitute Buddha’s teachings are commonly arranged according to the three turnings of the wheel of Dharma. In each of the three wheels the Buddha taught differently to various disciples, depending on and in accordance with their interests, intelligence, and level of development. Based on these teachings the schools of Buddhist philosophy developed with each holding different views regarding selflessness. During the in the teachings of the first turning, delivered in Deer Park near Varanasi, the Buddha taught only the course and subtle selflessness of persons as posited by the Great Exposition, Sūtra, Mind-Only, and Middle Way Autonomy schools. In the teaching of the second wheel, the *Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras* taught on Vulture’s Peak, he explained the subtle selflessness of both persons and phenomena according to the view now held by the two Middle Way Schools. In the teachings of the third turning of the wheel at Vaishali, he taught the *Sūtra Unraveling the Thought* which clarifies the meaning of the second wheel for trainees who cannot penetrate its profound meaning. The selflessness of phenomena explained in this teaching is held as foremost by the Mind-Only School. The table below gives an overview of these differences as explained by Jetsun Chokyi Gyaltzen in his *Presentation of Tenets*. Selflessness of phenomena means any existing phenomena other than the person.

School	Coarse selflessness of person	Subtle selflessness of person	Selflessness of Phenomena
Great Exposition School (Vaibhāṣhika)	Person’s emptiness of being permanent, unitary and independent	Person’s emptiness of being self-sufficient substantially existent	Don’t accept selflessness of phenomena
Sūtra School (Sautrāntrika)	Person’s emptiness of being permanent, unitary and independent	Person’s emptiness of being self-sufficient substantially existent	Don’t accept selflessness of phenomena

Mind-Only School (Chittamātra)	Person's emptiness of being permanent, unitary and independent	Person's emptiness of being self-sufficient substantially existent	The apprehended and apprehender being empty of being substantial different	
Sūtra Middle Way Autonomy School (Sautrāntrika-Svātantrika-Mādhyamika)	Person's emptiness of being permanent, unitary and independent	Person's emptiness of being self-sufficient substantially existent	Phenomena being empty of being truly established	
			Coarse Selflessness of Phenomena	Subtle Selflessness of Phenomena
Yogic Middle Way Autonomy School (Yogācāra-Svātantrika-Mādhyamika)	Person's emptiness of being permanent, unitary and independent	Person's emptiness of being self-sufficient substantially existent	The apprehended and apprehender being empty of being substantial different	Phenomena being empty of being truly established
Middle Way Consequence School (Prāsaṅgika-Mādhyamika)	Person's emptiness of being self-sufficient substantially existent	Person's emptiness of being truly established in the sense of empty of inherent existence	The gross object composed of part-less particles and the apprehender being empty of being substantial different	Phenomena being empty of being truly established in the sense of empty of inherent existence

Realizing Selflessness of Persons in the Middle Way School

Here is a simplified form of the process of realizing selflessness of persons according to the Consequence Middle Way School (Prāsaṅgika-Mādhyamika).

The root cause of afflictions is the apprehension of concrete sense of “I” and “mine” called ignorance. The Buddha said in the *Dhammapada*:

“Foremost among the taints, is ignorance which is the worst of all stains”.

Before disturbing emotions like anger and attachment arise there is a strong apprehension of a concrete inherent self which doesn't exist in the way it appears. Whatever appears to one's consciousness is not necessarily in accordance with reality. For example, when sitting in an unmoving train at a station awaiting departure and a train on your right side moves, one can feel and think that one's own train is moving. One can totally believe this to be true until one looks at the platform on the left side and realizes that it is the other train that is moving. After this insight one will not generate the wrong consciousness that one's own train that is moving. The concrete inherent established self appears as existing separate from and independent of the body and mind, as if it exists totally from its own side. With the correct understanding of how the self actually exists – in a dependent way in relation with one's body and mind – one can eliminate this ignorance and thereby

abandon the root cause of the afflictions. In this way the eradication of suffering and the attainment of ultimate happiness are achieved. The four schools of Buddhist philosophy—Vaibhāṣhika, Sautrāntika, Chittamātra and Mādhyamika— describe the nature of ignorance and how it causes suffering to arise in different ways. Nāgārjuna, clearly defining the Prāsaṅgika School, says in his *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*:

“Obstructed by ignorance continues [suffering] existence.”

The same text also states:

“When [the views] of [an inherent] “I” and “mine” are extinguished, karma and afflictions cease and liberation [is obtained].”

Dharmakīrti says in his *Pramāṇavārttikakārikā*:

“When self is conceived, distinguishing others occurs. This conception of a self and other leads to attachment and aversion. This in turn results in the ensuing of all miseries.”

Based on a strong apprehension of a concrete “I” and “mine” one becomes more selfish which is not only a cause for suffering for oneself but also leads to more problems with people around us. Seeing oneself as more important than others, can lead to many conflicts. Elimination of this perception of the self leads to a strong generation of loving kindness and compassion towards those around us, bringing more happiness for self and others. Total elimination of this misapprehension of a self, in the minds of self and others gradually brings ultimate happiness for everyone.

In order to eliminate ignorance, the root cause of the afflictions, one uses mind training with human intelligence to analyze the difference between how the self ordinarily appears as an apprehension of an concrete “I” and “mine” and how it actually exists. Two important reasons are motioned in various texts of the Mādhyamika Philosophy to proof that the person is empty of inherent existence: the reason of one with or different from and the reason of dependent-origination.

Reason of Either One with or Different From

The following analysis is based on the first two reasons of Chandrakīrti’s seven-fold reasoning² 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 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:

² 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.

“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 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. 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. 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 uncompounded 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. Uncompounded 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*³ explaining how one knows one has generated the correct understanding of the two truths.

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],
 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.

³ These verses were translated by Lama Zopa Rinpoche, © 2010 FPMT Inc., All rights reserved.