Chapter 10 The Perfection of Wisdom

10.1 The Importance of the Perfection of Wisdom

Lamp for the Path: Verse 41

When the practitioner has gained calm abiding,
Higher perception will also be gained,
But without practice of the perfection of wisdom,
The obstructions will not come to an end.

According to Mahayana Buddhism, of all of the Buddha's discourses, the essential teachings are those in the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras*, which present the two aspects of the path. Their explicit subject matter is the profound view of emptiness; their implicit subject matter, the stages of the path, or levels of realisation. In Verse 41, Atisha states that even when you have gained calm abiding, if you lack the perfection of wisdom, you will not be able to eliminate the obstructions.

Lamp for the Path: Verse 42

Thus, to eliminate all obstructions
To liberation and omniscience,
The practitioner should continually cultivate
The perfection of wisdom with skilful means.

In this verse, the text presents the importance of engaging in a path that is a union of method and wisdom. The following verses explain the meaning of method and wisdom.

Lamp for the Path: Verses 43 through 46

43. Wisdom without skilful means
And skilful means, too, without wisdom
Are referred to as bondage.
Therefore do not give up either.
44. To eliminate doubts concerning
What is called wisdom and what skilful means,
I shall make clear the difference
Between skilful means and wisdom.
45. Apart from the perfection of wisdom,
All virtuous practices such as
The perfection of giving are described
As skilful means by the Victorious Ones.
46. Whoever, under the influence of familiarity
With skilful means, cultivates wisdom
Will quickly attain enlightenment—
Not just by meditating on selflessness.

Lines of Experience: Verse 20

Profound wisdom is the eye with which to behold profound emptiness and the path by which to uproot (fundamental ignorance), the source of cyclic existence.

It is the treasure of genius praised in all the scriptural pronouncements and is renowned as the supreme lamp that eliminates the darkness of closed-mindedness. Knowing this, the wise who have wished for liberation have advanced themselves along this path with every effort. I, the yogi, have practiced just that. You who also seek liberation, please cultivate yourself in the same way.

The first sentence clarifies that because emptiness is the fundamental nature of reality (ignorance of which is the root of cyclic existence) the wisdom realising emptiness[36] is the eye that allows us to see reality's true nature. It is only by transcending the deluded perspective of ignorance and generating its opposite, the perspective of emptiness, that we can eliminate it.

The reason why Lama Tsong Khapa goes on to say that the perfection of wisdom is the treasure of genius praised in all the scriptural pronouncements is because to attain the omniscient wisdom of the Buddha is the highest of all spiritual aspirations. Every scriptural pronouncement of the Buddha was aimed either directly or indirectly at the attainment of this wisdom. Furthermore, the omniscient wisdom of the Buddha is the highest perfection of the wisdom of emptiness. Therefore, the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras*, the Buddha's teachings on emptiness, can be said to contain the innermost essence of all his teachings.

Lama Tsong Khapa also describes the wisdom realising emptiness as a lamp dispelling the darkness of ignorance. According to Nagarjuna and other masters, ignorance here must be identified as the fundamental misperception of reality; the grasping at the independent existence of things and events. The word "wise" is also significant. Although all followers of the Buddha aspire to liberation, from the Madhyamaka point of view, the Vaibhashika and Sautrantika practitioners have an incomplete understanding of the causation of cyclic existence and the nature of enlightenment. In this sense, they are not wise.

10.2 The Nature of Wisdom

Lamp for the Path: Verse 47

Understanding emptiness of inherent existence
Through realising that the aggregates, constituents
And sources are not produced [do not come into being]
Is described as wisdom.

This reference to the emptiness of inherent existence of all things refers to the ultimate nature of reality. In our ordinary perception of the world, we tend to perceive things as enjoying some kind of absolute status, as having concrete, objective reality. If we subject them to deeper analysis, however, we find that things do not exist in the way that they appear to us. All things and events lack inherent nature, and this absence of inherent nature is their ultimate reality, or emptiness.

Given that things lack inherent existence, their properties, such as coming

into being, abiding and ceasing, also lack inherent existence.

10.3 Emptiness According to the Various Buddhist Schools

When we talk about no-self, or emptiness, we are talking about something that is to be negated, or denied, and the critical point here is to identify exactly what it is that we are negating. Among the Buddhist schools that accept the teachings on the selflessness of phenomena in addition to the selflessness of persons, the principal ones are the Cittamatra and the Madhyamaka; the explanation of selflessness here is from the perspective of the Madhyamaka. This perspective is clearly explained in Aryadeva's *Four Hundred Verses on the Middle Way*, where he interprets the self that is to be negated in terms of the concept of independence, saying that

> Anything that comes into being dependently
> Lacks independent status.
> This absence of independence is emptiness.
> Therefore, the status of independence
> Is the self that is to be negated.

Of the Mahayana schools that accept the notion of no-self of person and the no-self of phenomena, all schools apart from the Madhyamaka Prasangika, including the Madhyamaka Svatantrika and Cittamatra schools, accept some notion of an intrinsic nature. The Svatantrikas and the Cittamatrins make a subtle distinction between the no-self of person and the no-self of phenomena, maintaining that the no-self of persons is grosser, or coarser, than the no-self of phenomena. From their point of view, what is to be negated in the context of a person is different from what is to be negated

in the context of the person's **five aggregates**, or factors of existence.[40]

In Madhyamaka Prasangika writings, however, such as the works of Aryadeva and the texts we are discussing, there is no difference in subtlety between the no-self of persons and the no-self of phenomena. The only distinction between the no-self of persons and the no-self of phenomena is the *bases* upon which selflessness is presented; the teachings on no-self are presented in relation to either persons or phenomena, ie, the aggregates.[40]

There are certain groups of Madhyamaka thinkers who accept some notion of intrinsic nature, albeit at the conventional level, but there's another group of Madhyamaka scholars who totally reject the notion of inherent existence anywhere, even at the conventional level. How did this fundamental divide come into being? The foundational texts of Middle Way thought are Nagarjuna's *Fundamentals of the Middle Way* and Aryadeva's *Four Hundred*. Two distinct interpretations evolved from these texts. Buddhapalita, for example, wrote a commentary on Nagarjuna's *Fundamentals* and developed a line of interpretation rejecting any notion of intrinsic existence, even at the conventional level.

Later, Bhavaviveka wrote his own commentary, The *Lamp of Wisdom (Prajnapradipa)*, in which he took issue with Buddhapalita. He also wrote other texts, such as the *Heart of the Middle Way* and its commentary, *Blaze of Reasoning,* which I mentioned before, when talking about the lineage of

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[40] A person's aggregates, also known as the **five aggregates** (Sanskrit: **pañca-skandha**), refer to the five components that constitute a human being's mental and physical existence. These aggregates are used to describe the processes that make up an individual's experience of life and are central to understanding the Buddhist concept of non-self (anattā).

The Five Aggregates

1. **Form (Rūpa)**
   - **Description**: This aggregate includes all physical aspects of existence, both internal (such as the body and sense organs) and external (such as physical objects and the environment).
   - **Examples**: The physical body, sense organs (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind), and the material world.
2. **Feeling (Vedanā)**
   - **Description**: This aggregate pertains to the sensations or feelings that arise from contact with sensory objects. Feelings can be pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral.
   - **Examples**: The sensation of pleasure when tasting something sweet, the pain felt when touching something hot, or the neutral feeling when hearing a background noise.
3. **Perception (Saṃjñā/Saññā)**
   - **Description**: Perception involves the recognition and identification of sensory information. It is the mental process of labelling and categorising sensory input.
   - **Examples**: Recognising the sound of a bell, identifying the colour red, or labelling a sensation as "soft."
4. **Mental Formations (Saṃskāra/Saṅkhāra)**
   - **Description**: This aggregate includes all volitional activities and mental formations, such as thoughts, emotions, intentions, and attitudes. It encompasses the mental factors that shape experiences & lead to actions.
   - **Examples**: Thoughts, desires, intentions, habits, decisions, and any mental activities driven by will or volition.
5. **Consciousness (Vijñāna/Viññāṇa)**
   - **Description**: Consciousness is the aggregate that refers to the awareness of sensory and mental objects. It is the basic awareness that underlies and supports the other aggregates.
   - **Examples**: Visual consciousness (awareness of seeing), auditory consciousness (awareness of hearing), and other forms of sensory consciousness.

Understanding the Five Aggregates

The five aggregates provide a framework for analysing personal experience and understanding the nature of self. According to Buddhist teachings, what we conventionally think of as the "self" is actually a collection of these five aggregates, which are in constant flux and lack inherent, independent existence.

- **Impermanence (Anicca)**: Each aggregate is transient and subject to change.
- **Suffering (Dukkha)**: Clinging to the aggregates as if they were permanent and self-sustained leads to suffering.
- **Non-Self (Anattā)**: The aggregates are not the self; they are processes that arise and cease dependent on conditions.

the Kadampa teachings. These two texts refuting the ideas of the Cittamatra School clearly reveal that the author himself subscribed to some notion of intrinsic existence, at least on the conventional level.

Bhavaviveka then notes that it is our consciousness that is the real, defined person and the referent of our personal terms. Again, this indicates that he accepts some notion of **inherent existence**.[41] Also, when disputing Buddhapalita, Bhavaviveka presents an epistemology in his commentary on Nagarjuna's Fundamentals in which it is evident that he accepts some notion of the intrinsic nature of objects.

If you want to deepen your understanding of emptiness, it is very helpful to look at how the different Buddhist philosophical schools understand no-self. To summarise, Vaibhashikas and Sautrantikas understand emptiness as self and person devoid of substantial reality. Cittamatrins, in addition to accepting the no-self of person, also accept the no-self of phenomena. They interpret the no-self of phenomena as the absence of duality between subject and object, and also through the notion that the referents of terms

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[41] **Emptiness of inherent existence** (Sanskrit: **śūnyatā**) is a profound and central concept that refers to the understanding that all phenomena lack intrinsic, independent existence. This teaching is crucial for realising the nature of reality and is foundational for achieving enlightenment.

Key Aspects of Emptiness of Inherent Existence

1. **Lack of Intrinsic Nature (Svabhāva)**
   - **Explanation**: Emptiness means that things do not possess a self-sufficient, permanent essence. Instead, they are empty of inherent existence and exist only in dependence on other factors.
   - **Dependent Origination (Pratītyasamutpāda)**: Phenomena arise due to a web of interdependent causes and conditions. Nothing exists in isolation or by itself.
2. **Non-Self (Anattā)**
   - **Explanation**: Emptiness is closely related to the concept of non-self. Just as phenomena lack intrinsic existence, so too does the self. The self is seen as a collection of the five aggregates, which are also empty.
3. **Middle Way (Madhyamaka)**
   - **Explanation**: Emptiness avoids the extremes of externalism (the belief in permanent, independent entities) and nihilism (the belief that nothing exists at all). It is the middle path that recognises the dependent and conditional nature of existence.

Philosophical Context

1. **Nagarjuna's Madhyamaka Philosophy**
   - **Core Teachings**: Nagarjuna, a prominent Buddhist philosopher, extensively wrote about emptiness. His seminal work, "Mūlamadhyamakakārikā" (Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way), deconstructs the idea of inherent existence and shows that all phenomena are empty.
   - **Key Verse**: "Whatever is dependently co-arisen, That is explained to be emptiness. That, being a dependent designation, Is itself the middle way." (Mūlamadhyamakakārikā 24:18)
2. **Heart Sutra**
   - **Core Teachings**: The Heart Sutra is a crucial Mahayana text that encapsulates the essence of emptiness. The famous line, "Form is emptiness, emptiness is form," illustrates the non-dual nature of phenomena and their emptiness.
   - **Explanation**: This means that what we perceive as forms (or physical objects) are empty of intrinsic nature, and this emptiness itself is not separate from the forms.

Practical Implications

1. **Liberation from Suffering**
   - **Insight**: Realising emptiness helps to overcome attachment and aversion, which are based on the mistaken belief in inherent existence. This realisation leads to liberation from the cycle of birth and death (samsara).
   - **Wisdom (Prajna)**: Cultivating the wisdom of emptiness is essential for achieving enlightenment. It transforms how one perceives and interacts with the world, leading to greater compassion and equanimity.
2. **Meditative Practice**
   - **Analytical Meditation**: Practitioners engage in analytical meditation to investigate the nature of phenomena and recognise their emptiness. This involves contemplating how things lack independent existence and arise dependently.
   - **Direct Realisation**: Through deep meditation, practitioners aim to directly experience the emptiness of all phenomena, which is beyond conceptual understanding.

and concepts do not exist in some absolute, intrinsic manner. Madhyamaka Svatantrikas follow Nagarjuna's teachings but present their own interpretation of emptiness, accepting a degree of intrinsic existence at the conventional level.

If you subject these positions to deeper analysis and reasoning, however, all these ideas, particularly those of the Madhyamaka Svatantrikas, can be shown to be untenable because they take for granted some notion of inherent existence. They also posit a faculty of experience known as reflexive, or self-cognising, awareness, and it is on the basis of this awareness that they explain the inherent existence of consciousness.

The fact remains, however, that all Madhyamaka thinkers, Prasangikas and Svatantrikas alike, are united in rejecting any notion of true, or ultimate, existence across the entire spectrum of reality. In this respect, they differ from the Cittamatra School, where a distinction is made between the external reality of matter and the internal reality of subjective experience. Cittamatrins reject the true existence of the external material world but maintain the true existence of internal consciousness. Madhyamikas, on the other hand, reject any notion of true existence right across the board.

However, there are two camps within Madhyamaka thought. One rejects the notion of inherent existence even on the conventional level; the other accepts the notion of inherent existence on the conventional level. The question then arises, which of these two distinct readings of Nagarjuna's and Aryadeva's texts should we follow? As is generally the case in Buddhist teachings, we have to subject these ideas to critical analysis and relate them to our own personal experience. When we do this, such notions as the inherent existence of our faculty of perception and self-cognising awareness all turn out to be untenable because they are refuted by critical reasoning. In general, Buddhist procedure is that any system of thought that is subject to fewer critical objections is more acceptable than one that contains more contradiction and inconsistency.

When you reflect upon the teachings on no-self (particularly upon the significance of presenting the teachings on no-self in relation to person and its factors of existence) you will appreciate the following fundamental point. Although there is a wide spectrum of reality, it is the individual and phenomena that relate to his or her experience of pain and pleasure, happiness and suffering (such as the individual's own mind-body aggregates) that are of immediate relevance. Therefore, right from the beginning, we make a distinction between the person and the person's objects of experience.

When we relate this teaching to our own personal experience, however, we can observe that when the thought, "I am," arises in us, it does so on the basis of our physical or mental constituents; our aggregates underlie "I am." We grasp at these aggregates, and it is on the basis of this grasping and the thought "I am" that we identify with them. This is how the grasping at phenomena serves as the basis for the grasping at the self of the person.

10.4 Dependent Origination

Grasping at phenomena obviously relates to the question of emptiness. When we reflect upon the meaning of emptiness, it is helpful to refer to Nagarjuna's *Fundamentals of the Middle Way*, where he entertains many objections from those who criticise his central conclusion that no thing or event possesses inherent existence. His critics object that saying nothing possesses inherent nature is a descent into nihilism, because it rejects the existence of anything. Nagarjuna responds by saying that this objection is based upon misunderstanding what he means by emptiness. To paraphrase him, "If you just reflect on the fact that the premise upon which I argue for emptiness is dependent origination, that alone reveals that by emptiness I do not mean nothingness. Emptiness is not to be equated with mere nothingness; it is simply the absence of inherent, independent existence."

Nagarjuna then presents a verse in which he states,

> Whatever is dependently originated,
> I call that to be empty.
> And that too is dependently designated,
> And this is the Middle Way.

What he is saying is that you arrive at the highest meaning of emptiness through dependent origination. When you understand dependent origination, you can reject any notion of independent existence; existence not dependent upon other factors. Things and events are dependently designated because their identity is derived in dependence upon other factors. When you reflect upon emptiness in terms of dependent origination, you can avoid the extremes of both nihilism (that nothing at all exists) and absolutism (that things possess independent existence). That is, the Middle Way.

Having stated in the *Precious Garland* that a person is not the earth, water, fire or wind elements, the aggregates and so forth, Nagarjuna does not conclude that the person does not exist. Rather, he says, the person is the accumulation of his or her aggregates. This implies that the process by which you cease to identify yourself with your constituent parts leads to an appreciation of the nature of your existence in terms of the dependent origination of its basis.

When you reflect in this way, you come to realise that what you normally feel and believe is actually contrary to the way in which things actually exist. When you think about your own self, you normally feel as if there is something that you can actually pinpoint and to which the term "person" refers. When you examine this in greater detail, however, you discover that there is actually no such unitary entity to which the term "person" refers and that this term is actually contingent upon the aggregation of many factors. When you arrive at this conclusion **you realise that the person that you initially believed to exist inherently is actually devoid of inherent existence. This is the meaning of emptiness**.

I personally feel that this way of approaching emptiness is more effective than going through an eliminative process of the person being neither body nor perceptions, neither mental formations, and so forth. Once you arrive at the point where, after going through this kind of eliminative process, you realise that the person cannot be found, it is still open to question whether or not you have actually understood emptiness. However, if you approach emptiness through the meaning of dependent origination, your path to the conclusion will be much more successful.

10.5 Establishing Emptiness Through Reasoning

Lamp for the Path: Verses 48 through 50

48. Something existent cannot be produced
Nor something non-existent, like a sky flower.
These errors are both absurd and thus
Both of the two will not occur either.

49. A thing is not produced from itself,
Nor from another, also not from both,
Nor causelessly either, thus it does not
Exist inherently by way of its own entity.

50. Moreover, when all phenomena are examined
As to whether they are one or many,
They are seen not to exist by way of their own entity,
And thus are ascertained as not inherently existent.

Verse 48 presents the reasoning behind establishing emptiness by reflecting upon phenomena from the point of view of their results and echoes a verse from Nagarjuna's *Seventy Stanzas on Emptiness*, where he explains that if one posits the intrinsic existence of all things, then the whole idea of things coming into being becomes absurd. Inherent existence implies some kind of independent, objective reality. If things were independent and objective, they would neither come into being nor cease to be.

In Verse 49, emptiness is presented from the point of view of analysing a thing's causes, while Verse 50 is written from the point of view of the actual entity itself, where the main reasoning is the absence of identity and difference. This refers to the type of reasoning where we take into account the labels of phenomena, such as "self" or "person."

We realise that such terms are designated upon certain bases. In the case of self or person, the designation is the self and its basis is the aggregates of mind and body. There is, therefore, a relationship between self or person and its basis. The reasoning of absence of singularity or plurality suggests that if we examine the relationship between self and the mind-body aggregates and analyse whether self is identical to or independent from them, we will come to the conclusion that the self is neither the same nor different.

We often postulate the inherent existence of things and events on the basis of their effects. We feel that because things can produce effects they

must have some inherent objective quality, or property. Also, because things come into being from certain causes and conditions, we think that they must have some intrinsic nature that causes them to occur. Therefore, we often posit the notion of inherent existence, or objective reality, on the basis of causes and effects. This is why, when negating the inherent existence of a phenomenon, we have to approach it from both its effects and its causes, along with the analysis of the nature of existence itself.

Verse 49 presents the "diamond slivers reasoning." When we say that such-and-such a thing originates, if we simply mean that a thing comes into being from its causes, this is acceptable. If, however, we are not satisfied by this mere nominal reality of the concept of origination, we may ask exactly how does something come into being? Is the effect identical with the cause or is the effect distinct from the cause, or did the effect come into being from a cause that is both identical and distinct, or from a cause that is neither identical nor distinct? The moment we ask such questions, we are already searching for some kind of inherent reality of phenomena, at least from the point of view of origination.

If the notion of origination were tenable, it would, of course, imply an inherent, or intrinsic, origination. However, through reasoning we find that a thing does not come from a cause that is either identical to or independent from its effects. Things also do not come from both the causes and effects, nor do they come from neither causes nor effects. We therefore conclude that things do not possess the characteristics of inherent, or intrinsically real, origination. One of the things that we can conclude as a result of this analysis is that those who accept the notion of inherent existence (at least on the conventional level of reality) are forced to also accept that things do come from inherently distinct causes and conditions.

This is clear from Nagarjuna's writings. In the first chapter of *Fundamentals of the Middle Way*, when he rejects the idea of other-production, he states that for those who posit the notion of inherent existence, much of the conventional use of language describing the relationship between an agent and its activity and things and their properties becomes untenable.

For example, when we say that a sprout comes into being or originates from its causes, we are saying that the origination of the sprout is, in a sense, a property or characteristic of the sprout. During the stage of the seed, however, the sprout is yet to be, but we can still say that because the seed is in the process of maturation, the seed is producing the sprout or the sprout is originating. At this point, the activity of origination is there, but the agent (the sprout) does not exist. Nagarjuna states that this is not a problem for those who reject any notion of inherent existence, because they posit concepts such as the seed producing the sprout purely at the level of linguistic transaction. If you posit these concepts by searching for an objective reality, however, then this relationship between a sprout and its origination becomes untenable. It is through this kind of analysis that the notion of the

inherent existence of things is rejected from the point of view of their causes and their effects.

At the heart of the Buddha's teachings lie the **four seals**,[42] or axioms, of Buddhism, and when we summarise the essence of everything the Buddha taught, we find that the basic framework is presented in the context of these four:

1. All composite phenomena are impermanent.
2. All contaminated phenomena are unsatisfactory, or in the nature of suffering.
3. All things and events are empty, or devoid of self-existence.
4. Nirvana is true peace.

It is the third of these (that all phenomena are empty, or devoid of self-existence) on which the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras* elaborate. In the Heart Sutra, the Buddha enumerated the five aggregates and said that each is devoid of self, or inherent, existence. In summarising this teaching, he states that "form is emptiness, emptiness is form." In other words, there is no emptiness apart from form and there is no form apart from emptiness.[43]

Therefore, when we search for the inherent nature of everything that we experience and perceive, including our five aggregates and all phenomena relevant to our personal experiences of suffering and happiness, we will be unable to find it. The inherent nature of form or any other phenomenon cannot be found. This is why Buddha stated that form is emptiness. However, this does not mean that all phenomena are non-existent. It simply means that all phenomena are devoid of inherent existence. The existence of phenomena can be understood only in terms of their dependent nature. There-

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[42] The "**Four Seals**" (also known as the **Four Dharma Seals**) are four fundamental principles that define the teachings of the Buddha. These seals serve as criteria to distinguish authentic Buddhist teachings from non-Buddhist ones.

1. All Composite Phenomena are Impermanent (Sarva-saṃskāra Anityaḥ)
Explanation:
- **Impermanence (Anicca)**: This seal states that all conditioned things, whether physical or mental, are transient and constantly changing. Nothing in the world remains static; everything is in a state of flux.
- **Implications**: Understanding impermanence helps to cultivate detachment and reduces attachment to worldly things, which is a source of suffering.

2. All Contaminated Things are Suffering (Sarva-saṃskāra Duḥkhaḥ)
Explanation:
- **Suffering (Dukkha)**: This seal highlights that all phenomena contaminated by ignorance, attachment, and aversion lead to suffering. It emphasises the unsatisfactory nature of worldly existence.
- **Implications**: Recognising the pervasive nature of suffering motivates practitioners to seek liberation and cultivate a deeper understanding of the causes of suffering.

3. All Phenomena are Empty and Selfless (Sarva-dharma Śūnyaḥ)
Explanation:
- **Emptiness (Śūnyatā) and Non-Self (Anattā)**: This seal asserts that all phenomena lack inherent existence and a permanent self. It reflects the teachings on the emptiness of all things and the absence of an eternal, unchanging self.
- **Implications**: Understanding emptiness and non-self leads to the dissolution of ego and a deeper realisation of interdependence, which is essential for attaining enlightenment.

4. Nirvana is True Peace (Nirvāṇa Śāntaḥ)
Explanation:
- **Nirvana (Nibbāna)**: This seal states that nirvana, the cessation of suffering and the ultimate goal of Buddhist practice, is the true peace. Nirvana is characterised by the extinguishing of the fires of greed, hatred, and delusion.
- **Implications**: Realising nirvana leads to liberation from the cycle of birth and death (samsara) and the attainment of ultimate peace and freedom.

[43] See HHDL's commentary in *Essence of the Heart Sutra* pp 91-97.

fore, Buddha stated that emptiness is form.

There is a very close relationship between form and its emptiness, because they are two aspects of one and the same phenomenon. According to the teaching on the two truths, each and every phenomenon possesses two natures, one at the conventional level of reality and one at the ultimate level. The conventional truth is the reality that can be accepted at the relative level; emptiness is the ultimate truth of all things and events. We must understand that the two truths are not independent of one another but are two different perspectives, or two natures, of the one phenomenon.

When we proceed with our analysis, one thing that helps us understand emptiness is the law of contradictions. In the world, we find factors that naturally contradict and oppose one other. Furthermore, there are certain phenomena that not only contradict one another but are also mutually exclusive (for example, dependence and independence). Something is either dependent or independent; there is no third possibility. Nagarjuna brings this into focus in his *Refutation of Objections (Vigrahavyavartani)*, where he states that if the absence of inherent existence is reversed, existence of inherent existence is automatically established. Things and events are either inherently existent or empty of inherent existence.

When you think like this, you will realise that when you subject all phenomena to reductive analysis and search for their true essence, you will arrive at a point where you cannot find a solid, concrete reality. However, our own personal experience affirms the reality of things, because we experience their effects. Some things cause us pain, others cause us happiness, so they must exist in some way. At the same time, however, these things and events do not possess the inherent, independent existence that we tend to project onto them.

This suggests, as Nagarjuna points out in his *Precious Garland*, that self or person is the aggregation of the six elements of earth, water, fire, wind, space and consciousness. Similarly, the way in which all phenomena exist can be understood only in terms of the aggregation of various factors; they lack any identity that is independent of other factors. As Buddhapalita stated in his commentary on Nagarjuna's *Fundamentals*, if things and events have an inherent intrinsic identity, we should be able to point at something and say, '"That's it." But such is not the case. When we use terms, labels and concepts, we have to apply them on the basis of the aggregation of many factors. This in itself suggests that things and events do not possess inherent or independent reality. Therefore, when you approach emptiness from the perspective of the dependent origination of things, the fact that things are devoid of inherent existence is brought into much sharper relief.

When you study the various presentations of the Buddha's teachings on no-self, including the premises upon which the Buddhist masters interpret them and the reasoning they use to establish their particular understanding, you will gradually come to appreciate the uniqueness of the teachings of the

Madhyamaka Prasangika School. Masters such as Buddhapalita and Chandrakirti interpreted Nagarjuna's teachings on emptiness in a unique and excellent way. When you subject their interpretations to critical analysis, you find that their particular reading of Nagarjuna's teachings on emptiness is the one that is the most compatible with valid reasoning and personal experience. If you base your study of emptiness on the writings of these great, authentic teachers, you will greatly deepen your appreciation of the incredible depth and clarity of their teachings.

10.6 Meditation on Emptiness

When you actually come to meditate on emptiness, it is more effective to meditate on the emptiness of self, or person, before meditating on the emptiness of phenomena. First you should investigate the self in which you believe, at which you grasp. Where does it reside? Is there a self above and beyond the way you experience it? Is there a self beyond the level of appearance? When you subject the inherent existence of your own self to critical analysis and search for its true nature, you will come to realise that it cannot be found. You cannot find a concrete self.

At this point you may ask yourself, does this mean that the self does not exist at all? But that cannot be the correct conclusion, because you know from personal experience that the self does things, is affected by the environment and so forth, all of which suggests that it possesses a certain degree of existence. However, this existence of the self can be understood only in terms of its dependent nature, that is, as a dependently originated phenomenon.

Once you realise this, you can use your understanding of the dependent origination of the self as a premise to reflect upon its emptiness; that although the self exists, it does not possess inherent, intrinsic reality. This is how to use your understanding of dependent origination[23] to arrive at an understanding of emptiness.

How do we determine that something is existent but something else is not? If we take the example of a real person and a dream person, we can see that they are equal in the fact that both of them lack inherent existence and objective reality. However, if we believe that the dream person is real, we can invalidate that belief by other conventional knowledge, such as past experience or third person testimony. Belief in the real person as real cannot be invalidated by such conventional means. This is one method for distinguishing between something that is existent and something that is not.

A second method is to rely upon reasoning based on the ultimate nature of reality. For example, with certain concepts postulated through metaphysical thought processes, or by adherents to some metaphysical schools that may not be susceptible to invalidation by conventional knowledge.

When you think along these lines, you appreciate Lama Tsong Khapa's sentiments when, near the end of the emptiness section of his Great Expo-

sition, he said, "O, my colleagues, learned in the great Middle Way treatises. Although in your mind it is very difficult to posit notions of cause and effect in a world devoid of inherent existence, nevertheless, embrace and uphold this by hailing it to be the way of the Middle Path."

This suggests that when you deepen your understanding of emptiness, you arrive at a point where the reality of things tends to disappear. Things seem to disintegrate and become insubstantial. This, however, is not an indication that they do not exist but rather that they are devoid of objective, substantial reality. In this instance, although it may be difficult to conceptually maintain the notion of cause and effect and the conventional reality of phenomena, you must persist and continually familiarise yourself with this kind of understanding.

Then, gradually, by constantly relating back to your personal experience, you will become more attuned to the experience of emptiness; more and more comfortable, conceptually and emotionally, with the notion that things and events do not possess inherent existence. This conclusion does not appear in your mind like a flash of lightning; an understanding of emptiness dawns only as the result of a prolonged process of continual reflection.

Lamp for the Path: Verses 51 through 54

51. The reasoning of the *Seventy Stanzas on Emptiness*
The *Treatise on the Middle Way* and so forth
Explain that the nature of all things
Is established as emptiness.

52. Since there are a great many passages,
I have not cited them here,
But have explained just their conclusions
For the purpose of meditation.

53. Thus, whatever is meditation
On selflessness, in that it does not observe
An inherent nature in phenomena,
Is the cultivation of wisdom.

10.7 The Non-Conceptual Understanding of Emptiness

54. Just as wisdom does not see
An inherent nature in phenomena,
Having analysed wisdom itself by reasoning
Non-conceptually meditate on that.

The reference to non-conceptuality in Verse 54 indicates the stages through which we progress and enhance our realisation of emptiness. Through treading the various stages of the path, such as the path of accumulation, and particularly the four levels of the path of preparation,[44] we

[44] Heat, summit, patience and supreme Dharma.

eventually arrive at an understanding of emptiness that is direct, intuitive and non-conceptual.

The importance of meditating on emptiness is universal among the four schools of Tibetan Buddhism. In the Nyingma School, the practice of *dzogchen* (particularly the "breakthrough" and "leap-over" practices) includes a preliminary process that is described as searching for the origin, the abiding and the dissolution of the nature of the mind. The meditation on emptiness comes into the picture in the context of this search. Similarly, the Kagyü teachings on *mahamudra* speak of "single-pointedness," "transcendence of conceptual elaborations," "single taste" and "beyond meditation." In this context, single-pointedness refers to the cultivation of calm abiding, whereas the first part of cultivating transcendence of conceptual elaboration is really the meditation on emptiness. The Sakya teaching on *sel-tong sung-jug* refers to non-duality and the union of profundity and clarity; profundity refers to the teachings on emptiness; clarity refers to the nature of mind.

In the Geluk, we need to cultivate the wisdom of emptiness in conjunction with the experience of bliss in the context of the practice of cultivating the wisdom that is the indivisible union of bliss and emptiness. In all four schools, the emptiness that is taught is that which Nagarjuna presented in his *Fundamentals of the Middle Way*. Nagarjuna's presentation of emptiness is common to both Paramitayana and Vajrayana. In Vajrayana, however, a unique practice places specific emphasis on cultivating the *subjective* experience of the wisdom of emptiness; the emptiness that is the *object* is common to both sutra and tantra.

Lamp for the Path: Verses 55 through 59

55. The nature of this worldly existence,
    Which has come from conceptualisation,
    Is conceptuality. Thus the elimination of
    Conceptuality is the highest state of nirvana.
56. The great ignorance of conceptuality
    Makes us fall into the ocean of cyclic existence.
    Resting in non-conceptual stabilisation,
    Space-like non-conceptuality manifests clearly.
57. When bodhisattvas non-conceptually contemplate
    This excellent teaching, they will transcend
    Conceptuality, so hard to overcome,
    And eventually reach the non-conceptual state.
58. Having ascertained through scripture
    And through reasoning that phenomena
    Are not produced nor inherently existent,
    Meditate without conceptuality.
59. Having thus meditated on suchness,
    Eventually, after reaching "heat" and so forth,

The "very joyful" and the others are attained
And, before long, the enlightened state of buddhahood.

10.8 The Union of Calm Abiding and Penetrative Insight

Lines of Experience: Verse 21

In (a state of) merely single-pointed meditative concentration, you do not have the insight (that gives you) the ability to cut the root of cyclic existence. Moreover, devoid of a path of calm abiding, wisdom (by itself) cannot turn back the delusions, no matter how much you analyse them. Therefore, on the horse of unwavering calm abiding, (masters) have mounted the discriminating wisdom that is totally decisive about how things exist [or, the wisdom penetrating the depths of the ultimate mode of being]. Then, with the sharp weapon of Middle Path reasoning,[45] devoid of extremes, they have used wide-ranging discriminating wisdom to analyse properly and destroy all underlying supports for their (cognitions) aimed at grasping for extremes. In this way, they have expanded their intelligence that has realised emptiness. I,

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[45] **Middle Path reasoning** is a core concept in Mahayana Buddhism, particularly within the Madhyamaka school of thought founded by the Indian philosopher Nāgārjuna. The Middle Path (or Middle Way) refers to a method of reasoning that avoids the extremes of externalism and nihilism, guiding practitioners toward a deeper understanding of the nature of reality, particularly the concept of emptiness (śūnyatā).

Key Elements of Middle Path Reasoning

1. **Emptiness (Śūnyatā)**
   - **Explanation**: Emptiness in this context means that all phenomena are empty of inherent existence. They do not possess an independent, permanent essence but are interdependent and contingent upon causes and conditions.
   - **Nagarjuna's View**: Nagarjuna's works, particularly the "Mūlamadhyamakakārikā" (*Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way*), articulate this view by systematically deconstructing the notion of intrinsic existence in all phenomena.
2. **Dependent Origination (Pratītyasamutpāda)**
   - **Explanation**: Dependent origination is the principle that all phenomena arise in dependence on a web of causes and conditions. Nothing exists in isolation or independently.
   - **Integration with Emptiness**: Dependent origination supports the view of emptiness by illustrating how things exist relationally rather than inherently.
3. **Avoiding Extremes**
   - **Externalism**: The belief that things exist permanently and independently.
   - **Nihilism**: The belief that nothing exists at all.
   - **Middle Path**: By avoiding these extremes, Middle Path reasoning seeks a balanced view that recognises the contingent and interdependent nature of reality.

Nagarjuna's Middle Path Reasoning

1. **Tetralemma (Catuskoti)**
   - **Explanation**: Nagarjuna often used the tetralemma, a fourfold logical structure, to deconstruct concepts:
     - A proposition is true.
     - A proposition is false.
     - A proposition is both true and false.
     - A proposition is neither true nor false.
   - **Application**: By applying this reasoning, Nagarjuna demonstrated that all conceptual assertions about the nature of reality fall short, thereby highlighting the emptiness of inherent existence.
2. **Mūlamadhyamakakārikā**
   - **Example Verse**: "Whatever is dependently co-arisen, that is explained to be emptiness. That, being a dependent designation, is itself the middle way." (Mūlamadhyamakakārikā 24:18)

Practical Implications

1. **Wisdom and Compassion**: The realisation of emptiness through Middle Path reasoning is not just an intellectual exercise but is meant to transform one's understanding, leading to greater wisdom and compassion.
2. **Meditative Practice**: Practitioners use this reasoning in analytical meditation to deepen their understanding of emptiness and reduce attachment to inherent existence.

> the yogi, have practiced just that. You who also seek liberation, please cultivate yourself in the same way.

This verse presents the importance of cultivating the union of calm abiding and penetrative wisdom focused on emptiness.

Lines of Experience: Verse 22

> Once you have achieved single-pointed concentration through accustoming yourself to single-pointedness of mind, your examination then of individual phenomena with the proper analysis should itself enhance your single-minded concentration, settled extremely firmly, without any wavering, on the actual way in which all things exist. Seeing this, the zealous have marvelled at the attainment of the union of calm abiding and penetrative insight. Is there need to mention that you should pray (to attain it as well)? I, the yogi, have practiced just that. You who also seek liberation, please cultivate your- self in the same way.

This verse points to the possibility of actually reinforcing your single-pointed stability of mind through a process of analysis. The following verse presents the difference between the post-meditation session and the path during the actual meditation session.

Lines of Experience: Verse 23

> (Having achieved such a union) you should meditate both on space-like emptiness while completely absorbed (in your meditation sessions) and on illusion-like emptiness when you subsequently arise. By doing this, you will, through your union of method and awareness, become praised as someone perfecting the bodhisattva's conduct. Realising this, those with the great good fortune (to have attained enlightenment) have made it their custom never to be content with merely partial paths. I, the yogi, have practiced just that. You who also seek liberation, please cultivate yourself in the same way.

During the meditation session, you focus primarily on the space-like nature of reality, which is simply the absence of inherent existence in all things. When you arise from the session and engage with the world, your meditation experience should permeate your post-session experience such that you perceive as illusory everything with which you come into contact. Although you might perceive objects as having some kind of concrete reality, you realise that in essence, they lack such reality.

We now return to Atisha's *Lamp*. In the context of the Perfection Vehicle, although the method and wisdom aspects of the path mutually reinforce and complement one another, they are presented as two distinct continua of consciousness. The profound feature of the Vajrayana path is that the union of method and wisdom is not a question of two independent factors complementing one another but rather one of both factors being present

and complete within a single state of mind. This is achieved through the practice of deity yoga.[?]

10.9 The Vajrayana Path

Lamp for the Path: Verse 60

If you wish to create with ease
The collections for enlightenment
Through activities of pacification,
Increase and so forth, gained by the power of mantra,

In the next verses, the text goes on to talk about the importance of finding a spiritual teacher and developing a proper reliance on this teacher, and points out that this practice is presented in the context of Vajrayana.

Lamp for the Path: Verses 61through 67

61. And also through the force of the eight
And other great attainments like the "good pot"—
If you want to practice secret mantra,
As explained in the action and performance tantras,
62. Then, to receive the preceptor initiation,
You must please an excellent spiritual teacher
Through service, valuable gifts and the like
As well as through obedience.
63. Through the full bestowing of the preceptor initiation,
By a spiritual teacher who is pleased,
You are purified of all wrong-doing
And become fit to gain powerful attainments.
64. Because the *Great Tantra of the Primordial Buddha*
Forbids it emphatically,
Those observing pure conduct should not
Take the secret and wisdom initiations.
65. If those observing the austere practice of pure conduct
Were to hold these initiations,
Their vow of austerity would be impaired
Through doing that which is proscribed.
66. This creates transgressions that are a defeat
For those observing discipline.
Since they are certain to fall to a bad rebirth,
They will never gain accomplishments.
67. There is no fault if one who has received
The preceptor initiation and has knowledge
Of suchness listens to or explains the tantras
And performs burnt offering rituals,
Or makes offering of gifts and so forth.

Similarly, in Verse 24 of *Lines of Experience*, Lama Tsong Khapa presents the general procedure of the paths according to Vajrayana.

Lines of Experience: Verse 24

> (Renunciation, an enlightened motive and correct view of emptiness) are necessary in common for (achieving) supreme paths through either of the two Mahayana vehicles of (practicing) causes (for enlightenment) or (simulating now) the results (you will achieve).
>
> Therefore, once you have properly developed like this these (three principal) paths, you should rely on the skilful captain (of a fully qualified tantric master) as your protector, and set out (on this latter, speedier vehicle) across the vast ocean of the (four) classes of tantra. Those who have (done so and) devoted themselves to his or her guideline instructions have made their attainment of (a human body with all) liberties and endowments fully meaningful (by attaining enlightenment in their very lives). I, the yogi, have practiced just that. You who also seek liberation, please cultivate yourself in the same way.

10.10 Question and Answer Period

Question. Your Holiness, although my meditation experience is very shallow and weak, when meditating on the lack of inherent existence of self, I become scared at the dawn of that understanding. Is this normal? Is there an antidote?

His Holiness. There are two possibilities. One is that perhaps your understanding of emptiness is not deep enough, in which case there is a danger of your sliding into a nihilistic interpretation of the meaning of emptiness, where emptiness almost becomes a concept of nothingness or non-existence. This can then cause some kind of fear of non-existence. Under such circumstances, it is important to reinforce your conviction in the efficacy of the law of cause and effect, and particularly in the teachings of dependent origination, because the true meaning of emptiness has to be understood in terms of dependent arising. The antidote to this fear is reinforcing your understanding of the dependent origination of things, their cause and effect nature, how they come into being and what kind of conventional, or relative, status they possess. However, it is also possible that your understanding of emptiness is correct. When you deeply reflect on emptiness, it is not impossible that some kind of fear or anxiety might arise in you, because what we normally take for granted and hold to be unquestionable—this solid, concrete reality and independently existing self—has been shown to be false. This kind of realisation can cause a sense of fear, but this fear gradually diminishes as you deepen your understanding of emptiness more and more.

Question. How can the law of dependent origination explain the continuity of mind? Is the mind an independent phenomenon?

His Holiness. It is possible to misunderstand the ever-present continuity of consciousness as being some kind of eternal entity, but just because something retains its continuum does not mean that it is an eternal, unchanging, permanent phenomenon. For example, when we look carefully, we see the tremendous complexity of the world of experience. It is this very complexity, in fact, to which we refer as consciousness, or mind, and it is on the basis of this continuum that we describe states of mind as being of particular types.

Also, we know from our personal experience that our thoughts, emotions and attitudes can [and do] change. If the mind were permanent and independent, therefore, there would simply be no room for such changes to occur. The fact that there is room for change and transformation suggests that consciousness is a dynamic, ever-changing phenomenon. We can understand consciousness only in terms of a continuum, but this continuum can only be understood in relation to the succession of many events. This already suggests that we are talking about a composite phenomenon and that consciousness is dependently originated.

When we look at things and events, we can see that there is a relationship between the whole and the constituents that come together to compose it. The fact that something is said to be whole immediately suggests its relationship with its constituent parts. The constituent parts are not independent or separate from the whole, nor are they identical to it. There is a relationship between the two.

Question. We have asked Your Holiness many questions. What question would you ask us that we might each answer within ourselves?

His Holiness. Examine yourself to see whether or not you are dedicated to your spiritual practice. This is very important.

10.11 Dedication

Atisha concludes his *Lamp* with:

> 68. I, the Elder Dipamkarashri, having seen it
> Explained in sutra and in other teachings,
> Have made this concise explanation
> At the request of Jangchub Ö.

And finally, Lama Tsong Khapa makes this dedication:

> 25. In order to accustom this to my own mind and also to benefit others as well who have the good fortune (to meet a true guru and be able to practice what he or she teaches), I have explained here in easily understandable words the complete path that pleases the buddhas. I pray that that the merit from this may cause all sentient beings never to be parted from these pure and excellent paths. I, the yogi, have practiced just that. You who also seek liberation, please cultivate yourself in the same way.

Then, in the colophon to Lines of Experience, we read:

This concludes the *Abbreviated Points of the Graded Path to Enlightenment*, compiled in brief so that they might not be forgotten. It has been written at Ganden Nampar Gyelwa'i Monastery on Drog Riwoche Mountain, Tibet, by the Buddhist monk Losang Dragpa, a meditator who has heard many teachings.

In conclusion, my wish is that you all try to be warm-hearted people. This is the most important thing. I myself try to be a sincere follower of the Buddha. Even in my dreams, I always remember that I'm a Buddhist monk. This feeling will remain until my death. In the meantime, I try to dedicate my existence to the benefit of others. If you, too, practice in this way, we will truly become genuine, good friends.