Chapter 10 Countering Objections (verses 106 - 115)

Practicing Wisdom

Dualistic Elaborations

At the beginning of his *Stanzas on the Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, Nagarjuna pays homage to Buddha Shakyamuni. The manner in which he **extols the Buddha's virtues and pays homage to him outlines his two main themes: the teaching of emptiness and the principle of dependent origination.** In two verses, Nagarjuna salutes the **Buddha as someone who has the capacity to teach the philosophy of emptiness and dependent origination with authority and with full knowledge of the appropriate timing, and of the spiritual needs, mental capacities, and temperaments of his listeners.**

In these two verses he states that **dependently originated phenomena (things and events) possess characteristics such as origination, cessation, and mobility.** In terms of characteristics, there are such qualities as origination and cessation. In terms of time, there are existence and nonexistence, as well as mobility: going and coming. In terms of identity, there are oneness and multiplicity. All of these characteristics exist on the conventional level. These characteristics do not inhere[18] in things and events as their ultimate natures. From the ultimate perspective of the direct realization of emptiness, these diverse characteristics do not exist.

Emptiness is described by Nagarjuna as the total dissolution of all dualistic elaborations. When we speak of dualistic elaborations, there are of course different meanings. For instance, it could mean the elaboration of substantial reality, which is the object to be negated; such a dualistic elaboration does not even exist conventionally. **Dualistic elaboration sometimes also refers to the ignorant mind grasping onto true existence and its derivative deluded states of mind. When dualistic elaborations are understood this way, although they are objects to be refuted, they do exist conventionally.**

Sometimes, dualistic elaboration also refers to conventional characteristics, such as the eight characteristics of dependently originated phenomena; origination, cessation, and so on. From the perspective of direct realization of emptiness, these elaborations do not exist because they are not the ultimate nature of the reality. It is by the non-seeing and non-perceiving of these characteristics that the arya being, in meditative equipoise, is said to realise emptiness directly. That does not mean, however, that these characteristics of phenomena are to be negated, nor does it mean that these characteristics do not exist conventionally. They are not perceived by the meditator in his meditative equipoise when the mind is totally fused, single-pointedly and directly, with the realization of emptiness. However, they *do* conventionally inhere in dependently originated phenomena.

Therefore, we need to distinguish between emptiness, which is the ultimate nature of reality, and *being in the nature of* emptiness. For example, **conventional phenomena, such as things and events, cannot be said to be emptiness as such, but are rather in the nature of emptiness in that they are empty of intrinsic existence. From the perspective of the meditative equipoise that perceives emptiness directly and is totally fused with that realization, conventional phenomena do not exist because they are not perceptible to someone in that meditative equipoise.**

Nagarjuna states in *Stanzas on the Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way* that **by realising emptiness, we can cease the dualistic and conceptual elaborations constructed by karma and afflictions. He states that when karma and afflictions cease, one attains nirvana, freedom. So nirvana is defined in terms of the cessation karma and afflictions, a state where afflictions have completely come to an end and where karma has lost its potency to produce rebirths. The individual may still carry karmic imprints but can no longer create new karma, because the afflictions, which give rise to karma, have been eliminated.** Dharmakirti helps us understand this further when he states in his *Valid Cognition* that within the psyche of the being who has gone beyond the ocean of samsara, karmic imprints can still be found. However, **these imprints cannot give rise to future rebirths in cyclic existence because the cooperative conditions, the afflictions, have been totally eliminated.**

How does such a nirvana or freedom come about? There are four factors (karma, afflictions, conceptual thought processes, and dualistic elaborations) the cessation of which is related to this question. Karma is created by afflictions, afflictions are created by conceptual thought processes, and the conceptual thought processes are fuelled by dualistic elaborations, which here refers to the ignorant mind grasping onto the true existence of phenomena. Ie, the causes giving rise to rebirth in cyclic existence are karma and afflictions. Grasping onto true existence can only be eliminated by generating insight into emptiness. Only by generating the awareness that penetrates the nature of emptiness can the dualistic elaboration grasping onto true existence of phenomena be eliminated.

[18] **inhere** |exist essentially or permanently in: the potential for change that inheres within the adult education world.

The Ultimate Creator

Khunu Rinpoche states that there can be a different reading of the line about the pacification of dualistic elaborations in *Stanzas on the Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*. He says it can be read as stating that **it is both the insight into emptiness that eliminates the dualistic elaborations, and also it is within the sphere of emptiness that dualistic elaborations are ultimately pacified.** So now, when Nagarjuna speaks of pacification of afflictions within the sphere of emptiness, what is meant by *emptiness* here? Emptiness should not be viewed as a kind of ontological category, existing "out there" and separate from the particular things and events. In the context of Nagarjuna's verse, ***emptiness* refers specifically to the emptiness of the mind; the mind's absence of independent, intrinsic existence. In this context, we can say then that the ultimate creator of all phenomena, both samsara and nirvana, is the mind. All the afflictions and delusions of mind that are created by mind must finally be cleansed by the nature of the mind itself.** In other words, **the mental pollutions and so on that are created by the mind must be eliminated by utilising methods that are rooted in the mind. The result (the fully enlightened state of buddhahood) is also a state of mind.** So what we find here is that **the mind plays a tremendously important role in our process of purification and perfection.** It says in the *Sublime Continuum (Uttaratantra)* that all pollutants of the mind are adventitious; that is, they are separable from the mind. All the enlightened qualities of the Buddha's omniscient mind exist as potentials in the minds of sentient beings.

In Sakya literature, there is a statement that within the basis, which is the causal *mind-basis-of-all (kun shi)*, all phenomena of samsara and nirvana are complete. Thus **the mind-basis-of-all is in some sense the fundamental innate mind of clear light.** All phenomena of samsara exist within that basis. This is at the level of ordinary beings, not where the individual has become perfected. Therefore, this foundational consciousness is called the *causal continuum*. Within that causal continuum, all phenomena of samsara are complete in the form of their natural characteristics, all phenomena of the paths and grounds are complete in the form of their qualities, and all enlightened qualities of the Buddha's omniscient mind are complete in the form of their potentials. This summarises the essence of the Sakya approach to the understanding of the grounds, path, and result. It presents a beautiful and comprehensive picture.

Therefore, whether it is the Nyingmapas' *dzokchen*, the *mahamudra* of the Kagyu school, the Sakyas' *lamdré* view of the union of profundity and clarity, or the Gelug understanding of *mind isolation* according to the *Guhyasamaja Tantra*, **the emphasis is on realising the ultimate nature of mind. There is no difference between the mind's emptiness and the emptiness of external objects. Contemplation on the emptiness of mind is especially emphasised in meditative practices in all four schools of Tibetan Buddhism because it has such a dramatic impact on the mind of the practitioner.**

When I refer to *mind* in this context, I am using the term in a general sense, without distinguishing between *sem* (mind) and *rikpa* (pristine awareness). I am using *mind* as a general term covering all types of cognitive events. The main point I am making is that when talking of the cessation of conceptual or dualistic elaborations, it is important to be aware of the different meanings of the expression according to the different contexts. For example, among dualistic elaborations, some can be negated and some cannot; some exist and some do not. We need to be sensitive to how context affects the meaning of terminology.

Commentary

Defending the Two Truths

In the last chapter we saw Shantideva defend the Madhyamaka philosophy of emptiness against criticisms by explaining the nature of the existence of phenomena. His opponent now asserts that according to the Madhyamaka view, it would be impossible to establish the two truths. As for the division of the root text in this section, the commentaries of Minyak Künsö and Khenpo Künpal both agree. However, there appears to be a slight difference in their reading of the relevant verses. I will first present Minyak Künsö's reading.

In these first two verses, the opponent argues that because the Madhyamikas claim that all phenomena are devoid of inherent existence, they cannot speak coherently of identity or even existence.

> 106. "If this is so," you say, "the relative will cease,
> And then the two truths—what becomes of them?
> If relative depends on beings' minds,
> This means nirvana is attained by none."
>
> 107. This relative is just the thoughts of beings;
> That is not the relative of beings in nirvana.
> If thoughts come after this, then that is still the relative;
> If not, the relative has truly ceased.

If all phenomena lack inherent existence, objects Shantideva's opponent, then all conventional realities (things and events) will be devoid of identities. If this is so, conventional reality will cease to exist. And if conventional reality does not exist, then even ultimate truth cannot exist. So, how can you maintain that there are two truths?

This doubt arises from misunderstanding what is meant by conventional truth. Earlier I mentioned that **in the context of conventional truth (and from the perspective of a misperceiving mind) reality is understood in terms of things and events having some form of objective truth. This is analogous to mistakenly perceiving a snake when seeing a coiled rope. There is no basis in reality for such a perception to be valid.** Similarly, **nothing in reality (whether a thing or an event) exists substantially, inherently, or independently in its own right.** To this the opponent raises the objection that nothing would exist if no thing or event exists in its own right. And if that is so, they continue, how can you Madhyamikas maintain that sentient beings can attain freedom?

The Madhyamikas respond by stating that conventional truth is posited in relation to the perspectives of sentient beings. **The everyday world of conventional truth is said to be true from the perspective of the ignorant mind that apprehends things and events as having inherent existence. But that perspective is invalid. However, within conventional terms, there is a perspective where the existence of things and events can be established as valid.**

Conventional realities have the power to affect our lives; they cause pain and pleasure, for example. The question can be asked, "What exactly are the Prasangika-Madhyamaka criteria for establishing things and events as conventionally real or existent?" There are three criteria, and they hinge upon the understanding that only in the aftermath of negating the intrinsic existence of things and events can we validly and coherently establish their conventional reality. The first criterion states that things and events are validly established by valid experience or convention. The second states that the truth of their existence cannot be contravened by valid experiences. And the third states that conventional realities cannot be negated by analysis into their ultimate nature.

This is utterly different from an illusion, where we perceive an object on the basis of something else. For example, in a magic trick, we might see illusory horses and elephants because of the magician's conjuring powers. The horses and elephants are, even in conventional terms, false perceptions. Therefore, the perception of horses and elephants can be invalidated by other valid experiences. One need not resort to an ultimate analysis to disprove them. **Given these two types of conventional perceptions (one valid and the other false) it is critical to be able to distinguish between, say, a real person and a dream person. For example, one distinction between slaying a real person and taking the life of a dream person is that in one case, a cardinal non-virtue is committed, while in the other case this is not so. But while a dream person is not a real person, both are equal in lacking intrinsic existence. It is therefore important to be able to maintain a coherent approach to conventional reality in the aftermath of negating intrinsic existence.**

Khenpo Künpal, however, reads these verses as relating to the perspective of the fully enlightened mind. He says that if, following the attainment of full enlightenment (which is characterised as the total dissolution of all conceptual elaborations) the reality of conventional phenomena is not maintained, then things, events, and their conventions will not be real.

By meditating on the sphere wherein all dualistic elaborations have been pacified, we accumulate wisdom. And we accumulate merit by deepening our conviction in the validity of the causal principles within the context of conventional truth. It is only on the path that combines these two elements (the accumulation of both merit and wisdom) that we can make our way to the Buddha's full enlightenment.

As this next verse suggests, **categories such as "subject and object," "perception and object," "one and many," "self and others," and of course, the "existence of all phenomena" are dependent upon worldly conventions. They are thus relative.**

> 108. Analysis and what is to be analysed
> Are linked together, mutually dependent.
> It is on the basis of conventional consensus
> That all examination is expressed.

Now, a further objection is raised by the opponent:

> 109. "But when the process of analysis
> Is made in turn the object of our scrutiny,
> This investigation, likewise, may be analysed,
> And thus we find an infinite regress."

They contend that if it is through the application of critical analysis that we examine the ultimate nature of phenomena, then the analysis itself is also ultimately subject to such critical analysis. In this analysis then, another analysing mind is needed, which in turn would require another analysis, and so on, leading to an infinite regress. Shantideva presents the Madhyamika's response to this objection:

> 110. If phenomena are truly analysed,
> No basis for analysis remains.
> Deprived of further object, it subsides.

That indeed is said to be nirvana.

When the object of an inquiry is subjected to critical analysis, the subject too is revealed to be devoid of any intrinsic reality or intrinsic origination. This absence is described as nirvana, the state beyond sorrow. So while a meditator is directly experiencing the emptiness of intrinsic existence of all phenomena, there is no basis for grasping onto the intrinsic existence of anything else. For the meditator in this state, there is no awareness of subject and object. A subject-object distinction could be made, but since the meditator's mind is totally fused with the absence of inherent existence, there is no need to analyse the emptiness of the analysing mind itself.

Above, we discussed the many different subtleties of emptiness or selflessness. When a person has an awareness of the grosser levels of emptiness, it is possible that, within the psyche of the individual, notions of self-existence corresponding to subtler levels of emptiness still persist. However, **if you experience subtle emptiness (such as the emptiness of inherent existence** as understood by the Prasangika-Madhyamaka school) **then while that ascertainment remains manifest in your mind, there is no room for any grasping onto any degree of selfhood or self-existence to arise.**

Countering the Buddhist Realists

In the next section, Shantideva refutes the conceptions of true existence by various schools of thought. He begins with the analysis of the positions of the Buddhist realists (the Vaibhashikas and Sautrantikas) who state that sensory perceptions (visual perceptions and so forth) and their objects both possess intrinsic or substantial reality. These views are negated in the following verses.

111. Those who say that "both are true"
Are hard pressed to maintain their case.
If consciousness reveals the truth of things,
By what support is consciousness upheld?

112. If objects show that consciousness exists,
What, in turn, upholds the truth of objects?
If both subsist through mutual dependence,
Both thereby will lose their true existence.

The realists maintain that both subject and object possess real and substantial existence. The Madhyamikas, however, object by pointing out the logical inconsistencies and flawed reasoning behind such a philosophical view. The Madhyamika asks, "If consciousness establishes the substantial reality of things, then what support do you have to claim the substantial reality of the subject; consciousness itself? However, if objects validate the substantial reality of the subject (consciousness) then what validates the substantial reality of the object? If subject and object are established by means of mutual dependence (certifying each others' substantial reality) then both lose their substantial reality. For were they substantially and intrinsically real, they would be independent of each other." The Madhyamika then uses an analogy to demonstrate that subject and object are mutually dependent and neither enjoys any independent, substantial existence:

113. If, without a son, a man cannot be a father;
Whence, indeed, will such a son arise?
There is no father in the absence of a son.
Just so, the mind and object have no true existence.

In this next verse, a further defence by the opponent is anticipated by Shantideva.

114. "The plant arises from the seed," you say, "
So why should not the seed be thence inferred?
Consciousness arises from the object—
How does it not show the thing's existence?"

The opponent argues that a shoot indicates the presence of a seed. Indeed, this is a basic premise of the realists, who assert the substantial reality of the origination of things and events. By analogy, they argue, since consciousness arises from the object, how does it not indicate the real existence of the object?

The Madhyamaka responds that a subject, or consciousness, distinct from the shoot is needed to deduce the existence of the seed.

115. A consciousness that's different from the plant itself
Deduces the existence of the seed.
But what will show that consciousness exists,
Whereby the object is itself established?

By what means do we cognise the existence of consciousness? What is being demonstrated here is that subject and object are mutually dependent, and thus neither enjoys independent, autonomous status. Therefore, neither cognition nor its object possesses intrinsic existence. They are both relative.

The Importance of Reason

Aryadeva mentions in *Four Hundred Verses on the Middle Way* that **if we trace the origin of material things, we find that their continuum is beginningless. Material things can have an end, but in terms of their continuum they are beginningless. Whether it be the external environment of rocks and plants and so on or the sentient beings living in it, if we were to trace their material origin, we could trace it to the beginning of our universe.**

According to the *Kalachakra Tantra*, matter can be traced back to a point when all matter was space particles. A particular universe system comes into being, remains for a long time, and then dissolves into an empty space. And from that empty space an entire world again emerges through a process of evolution. From the Buddhist point of view, there is a repetitive cycle of evolution and dissolution of the physical universe. This process seems to have some parallels with contemporary scientific explanations of our cosmos.

If we compare modern cosmology's description of Earth (its size, shape, age, and distance from other planets) with Buddhist texts such as the *Treasury of Higher Knowledge (Abhidharmakosha)*, which also presents cosmology, we find many contradictions. The Abhidharma cosmology seems to conflict with the scientific account derived from empirical observation. As Buddhists who accept the principle of reason, we must accept that these Abhidharma views contradict valid knowledge. The only option open to us here, therefore, is to discard Abhidharma cosmology as an accurate description of the physical universe and accept the scientific account.

In Mahayana Buddhism there is a hermeneutical tradition known as **the *four reliances*. The first reliance says that we should rely not on the person but rather on his or her work; second, regarding that work, we should not rely on the words but rather on the meaning; third, with respect to meaning, we should rely not on the provisional but rather the definitive meaning; and fourth, with regard to the definitive meaning, we should rely not on mere intellectual knowledge but rather on experiential understanding.**

The upshot is that any statement or claim that contradicts reason and valid experience cannot be upheld. Therefore, as Buddhists, we must discard any tenet that may contradict reason and valid experience. This is the general methodology in Buddhism; particularly in Mahayana thought. However, **it is important to draw a distinction between the non-observance of something and the observance of its nonexistence. Disproving something and not being able to prove something are two different things. This is a critical distinction.**

From the perspective of ordinary beings, there are three categories of phenomena; the apparent, the slightly obscure, and the extremely obscure. Cognition of apparent phenomena requires no reasoning, the cognition of slightly obscure phenomena is arrived at by inference, and extremely obscure phenomena can only be fully known on the basis of scriptural authority. The emptiness of intrinsic existence of all things is an example of the second category; the slightly obscure. It is not evident to us, and we need to rely on reasoned inferences to arrive at an understanding of it.

This threefold classification is not absolute. Some of the Buddhist concepts, such as the nature of the form and formless realms, or the fact that an individual's path to enlightenment requires three innumerable eons, are extremely obscure to us. They are neither apparent to us nor can they be known fully through reasoning. At our present level of consciousness, the only means available to us is the testimony of another person. However, from the Buddhist point of view, the testimony of another person cannot be taken as an authority simply because the person happens to be holy or well known. So **how do we determine the validity of a person's testimony? We need to subject that person's words to analysis, examining whether that person's descriptions of apparent phenomena contradict our valid experience, and whether that person's explanations of slightly obscure phenomena are affirmed or denied by logical inference. Once we have gained confidence in that person's reliability in these first two categories of phenomena, then we examine what that person says about extremely obscure phenomena.** We can check to see whether there are inconsistencies between the earlier and the later propositions and between the explicit and implicit standpoints. **Although the propositions may remain extremely obscure to us (that is, we have no direct or logical means by which to test their validity, either proving or disproving them) we can take the speaker's testimony as authoritative since his or her words have been proven valid in the areas where the propositions have allowed for logical analysis.**

Karma and Causality

Earlier we spoke about **causality, the relationship between cause and effect, and at what stage the karma of sentient beings affects the causal process. I feel that there is a causal process that is the general law of causation and also a stage where the intention of a sentient being can set a new chain of causal processes in motion. However, identifying this stage, I think, is extremely difficult, if not impossible.**

So **how exactly can we understand the karmic continuum?** To give an example, **when a stick is burned, although the wood has disappeared, it remains in the form of energy;** it has not disappeared completely. The Prasangika-Madhyamaka school adopts a similar notion of *cessation (shik pa)*. **This view maintains that although the physical reality of a phenomenon ceases, it remains as a type of energy or a potential.** Other Buddhist philosophical schools accept this cessation to be merely a mental construct or an abstract entity. In contrast, Prasangika-Madhyamikas consider **this as a type of potential, having the capacity to become a future cause within that continuum. I feel that the scientific idea of conservation of energy is in some ways similar to this notion of cessation.**

Cessation as a kind of potential refers to the point when the physical reality of an object has become nonexistent, but a potential still remains that can affect the course of the continuum of that object. This is, of course, different from the *cessation* of mental obscurations at nirvana. For while in both cessations something has ended, in the state of nirvana, the potential is no longer there. No new mental obscurations can arise.

Within the twelve links of dependent origination, the second, volition, is karma, and the tenth, *becoming*, also belongs to the category of karma. However, this does not mean that the karma of the second link has suddenly resurfaced. Rather, the potential implanted by the karmic action has reached a point where it has become fully activated and is ready to give rise to its fruition. So here we are referring to a potential that was left by the execution of a karmic act.

Meditation

For this meditation, focus on compassion. It is not enough merely to develop the wish that all sentient beings be free from suffering. Since sentient beings do not have the capacity to totally overcome their sufferings on their own, you should, on your part, develop a deep commitment to take responsibility to help all beings overcome suffering. This meditation is an excellent preparation for the generation of bodhichitta, the altruistic intention to attain buddhahood for the benefit of all beings.