Chapter 9. Wisdom

See Also Practicing Wisdom

9.1.
All these branches of the Doctrine
The Enlightened Sage expounded for the sake of wisdom.
Therefore they must cultivate this wisdom
Who wish to have an end of suffering.

There are many kinds of wisdom. There is, for example, the relative type of wisdom gained through the study of the five major traditional sciences.[43] There is also the wisdom of working for the benefit of others. When Shāntideva says here that "all these branches of the Doctrine were expounded for the sake of wisdom," he is referring to **the wisdom that is the realization of emptiness, the true nature of things. This is absolute wisdom.**

In order to realise emptiness, we do not actually need the first five pāramitās,[44] and they are not even essential for developing clear insight for vipashyana. But as we shall see, they are necessary if we wish to benefit other beings.

Nagarjuna says in the *Seventy Verses on Emptiness*:

Thus the Buddha said:
All things arise from causes and conditions;
To view them as real is ignorance
From this arise the twelve interdependent links.[45]

Further, it is said in the *Four Hundred Verses*:

The seed of existence is consciousness;
Phenomena are the field of consciousness.
If we see the non-reality of things,
We destroy the seed of existence.

These passages can be interpreted in various ways, but according to the tradition of Chandrakirti, which is the one to which Shāntideva adhered, the teaching of **Nagarjuna and his lineage says that to cling to the self as a real entity is to be ignorant, and the ignorance of believing that phenomena truly exist constitutes one of the twelve interdependent links. This gives rise to saṃsāric existence, which in turn is another of the twelve interdependent links.**

The second passage states that the seed of this saṃsāric existence is the kind of consciousness that has objects, or phenomena, as its field of experience. If these objects are understood to be devoid of ultimate reality, this seed of existence is undermined, and it is completely destroyed when the wisdom of realising that phenomena are without true existence is perfectly developed.

All schools of Buddhism, with one minor exception, agree **that the notion of a personal self, the "I," is dependent upon the five aggregates. They reject the belief in a self that exists independently of these aggregates.** However, **the theory of selflessness goes much further than the denial of the personal "I"**. For **one must aim to realise that all phenomena are empty, or devoid of true (intrinsic) existence, and have in fact a mode of being that is extremely subtle.**

As we have said, **when we see that phenomena or objects of consciousness are devoid of any true (inherent) entity, the seed of existence is destroyed. The reverse of this understanding is to cling to the belief that things have a solid reality, and this is the definition of ignorance.**

It is a mistake to believe that those who practice the lower vehicles are unable to free themselves from negative emotions and thereby attain liberation from samsara. Indeed, to think like this is a major breach of the Bodhisattva precepts. When those who follow the paths of the Shrāvakas and Pratyekabuddhas become Arhats,[46] they completely rid themselves of the obscurations engendered by negative emotions. They must also have a realization of emptiness, otherwise they would not be freed from saṃsāra. The wisdom of understanding emptiness in fact gives rise to three types of enlightenment: that of the Shrāvakas, that of the Pratyekabuddhas, and that of the Bodhisattvas.

When Shāntideva says, "9.1 All these branches of the Doctrine / The Enlightened Sage expounded for the sake of wisdom," he is referring to the wisdom of the Bodhisattvas and not to the mere insight into emptiness cultivated by the Shrāvakas and Pratyekabuddhas as they progress upon their paths.

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[43] The five major sciences are languages, logic, crafts, medicine, and philosophy.

[44] **Pāramitās** Generosity, Ethical Discipline, Patience, Diligence, Meditative Concentration, Wisdom. (Also the headings of this book.)

[45] See Glossary, Dependent Arising - Twelve links of interdependence.

[46] **Arhat** means "one who has destroyed the enemies." The enemies referred to are the negative emotions, which are vanquished through the practice of the teachings of the fundamental vehicle, or Shrāvakayāna. Arhats achieve liberation from the sufferings of saṃsāra, but because their realization of emptiness is not perfect, they are unable to remove the subtle veils of attachment to phenomenal reality, which are the obstacles to omniscience. They have yet to enter the Mahāyāna in order to progress towards the supreme goal of Buddhahood.

The celebrated ninth chapter on wisdom is of course daunting in its complexity. It is not easy to follow, and it is understandable perhaps that by the majority of readers it will be passed over in silence. But sooner or later, the question of wisdom and what Shāntideva means by this must be considered; as the **culmination of, and also the key to, the entire Bodhisattva path**. Shāntideva points out that **the whole of the *Bodhicharyāvatāra* so far (all the methods for purifying the mind and generating the virtues of vigilant introspection, patience, courage, and so on) is geared toward wisdom, the direct realization of emptiness, ultimate bodhichitta, without which the true practice of compassion is impossible.**

From the philosophical point of view, **Shāntideva belonged to the Madhyamaka or Middle Way school of Buddhist tenets.** This tradition, founded by Nāgārjuna in the second century and counting among its adherents a series of incomparable masters (Āryadeva, Buddhapālita, Bhāvaviveka, Chandrakīrti, Shāntarakṣhita, Atīsha, and others) flowered in India uninterruptedly for over a thousand years. Transmitted to Tibet in the eighth century, it has been **upheld to this day as the supreme expression of the Buddha's wisdom teachings.** There is obviously no question here of giving an adequate survey of Madhyamaka thought, but perhaps the following remarks will help readers gain an idea of its main lines and basic import.

In the centuries that followed the Buddha's death, various attempts were made to organise and formulate his teachings. Different systems appeared, basing themselves on the recorded scriptures, each purporting to express the Buddha's intended meaning. Four, or rather three, great syntheses emerged: that of the Vaibhāshika and Sautrāntika (which for practical purposes may be taken together), that of the Madhyamaka, and that of Vijñānavāda (also referred to as Yogāchāra or Chittamātra, the Mind Only school). That there should be a multiplicity of systems is not in itself surprising. **From the time of his enlightenment until his death fifty years later, the Buddha bestowed his teachings for the benefit of many different audiences. The purpose of his doctrine was always the same: to liberate beings from the round of suffering. The expression of this purpose, however, differed according to the capacity of his hearers.** It is therefore to be expected that the body of teachings remaining after his departure from the world should be rich and varied, containing elements that sometimes even contradict each other. The **Mahāyāna deals with this state of affairs by saying that statements made by the Buddha are of two kinds: definitive (Skt. *nītārtha*), corresponding to his true meaning, as understood by himself; and expedient (Skt. *neyārtha*), corresponding to a partial expression of his meaning, geared to the understanding of his hearers, intended to lead them along the path to perfect comprehension and being therefore of provisional validity. Parallel with this division is the doctrine of the two truths: ultimate truth (Skt. *paramārtha*), corresponding to the actual nature of things; and relative truth (Skt. *saṃvṛiti*), corresponding to the way they appear.** The Buddha skilfully graduated his teaching according to pedagogical necessity. For example, he spoke in terms of a self in the context of karma and ethical responsibility; as against the "nihilist" who disbelieves in survival after death. By contrast, he denied the existence of the ātman, as against the "eternalist" (who takes the self to be a changeless essence). He also said that there is neither self nor no-self.

What conclusion is to be drawn from this? What was Buddha's real position? We may take as our starting point Shāntideva's own words:

> Relative and ultimate,
> These the two truths are declared to be.
> The ultimate is not within the reach of intellect,
> For intellect is said to be the relative. (9.2)

The meaning of this is that all statements, all theories, anything emerging from the operations of the rational intelligence, have the nature of relative truth. Theories may be of practical utility and may concur with empirical experience, but as expressions of the ultimate truth, the "nature of things," they are inadequate. The ultimate is suprarational and cannot be expressed in conceptual terms. Thus, in the Pāli scriptures, the Buddha is recorded as saying that "the Tathāgata is free from all theories." And again, "The view that everything exists is, Kachchāyana, one extreme; that it does not exist is another. Not accepting the two extremes, the Tathāgata proclaims the truth from the middle position." The second passage is referred to explicitly by Nāgārjuna in his great work, *The Stanzas on the Middle Way*, with the remark that "the Lord has rejected both views: that of 'is' and that of 'is not.'" In other words, he has rejected all views. This means that **any statement claiming to encapsulate the ultimate truth, any formulation that points to "this" or "that" as being ultimately real, is false; false for the simple reason that it is a formulation, emanating from the conceptual intelligence.**

At first sight, this seems to be a form of nihilism. Apparently, it is the assertion that in the ordinary run of things we can know nothing of the truth; reality seems to be totally beyond our grasp, and Madhyamaka has not infrequently been misunderstood and criticised in this way. But to say that the "ultimate is not within the reach of intellect" does not mean that it cannot be known; it means simply that it exceeds the powers of ordinary thought and verbal expression. The knowledge of the ultimate transcends thought. It is suprarational. It is non-conceptual and non-dual; quite different, we may suppose, from anything that we have ever experienced to date. It is *prajñā*: immediate, intuitive insight into "suchness," the wisdom of emptiness beyond subject and object.

How is one to attain or even approach this kind of knowledge? Shāntideva gives the answer in a key stanza (the very point in his recitation at Nālandā when, according to the story, he and Mañjushrī began to rise into the air):

> **When something and its nonexistence**
> **Both are absent from before the mind,**
> **No other option does the latter have:**
> **It comes to perfect rest, from concepts free. (9.34)**

(Continued below)

What, is special about the Bodhisattvas' wisdom? Why do they meditate on emptiness? **Bodhisattvas aim to rid themselves of both the obscurations created by negative emotions and also of the obscurations that are obstacles to knowledge. They must free themselves from the former (obscurations created by negative emotions) before they can deal with the latter (obscurations that are obstacles to knowledge).**

(Continued from above)

These lines indicate the task in hand: the mind is to be left as it is, free and untrammelled, simply aware, no longer caught up and entangled in thoughts and theories and the grasping reification of self and substance. On the level of philosophical discourse, this involves the demonstration of the inadequacy of theories and systems purporting to express the ultimate truth. The basic position of Madhyamaka is that reason is insufficient. It is the recognition, in fact the discovery, that there is a radical lack in the structure of reason itself; something that prevents it from attaining to true knowledge of the ultimate. In the final analysis, **all rational formulations, however ingenious, contain within themselves paradox and inconsistency, the seed, in other words, of their own refutation. The task of Madhyamaka is to expose this inner incoherence. It proceeds in the knowledge that, if pushed in debate to explain themselves, all rationally constructed formulations will end in contradiction.** Thus Nāgārjuna does not advance a position of his own. Rather than a body of doctrines, **Madhyamaka is primarily a method, a system of philosophical criticism. It is dialectic pure and simple. Its procedure is to take a dogmatic assertion (the doctrine of the self, the theory of causation, or the existence of a divine creator, and so on) and gradually refute it; not by coming into head-on collision by positing a contrary view, but by gradually exposing, through a series of logical steps, the theory's own inner incoherence. The assertion is consequently reduced to absurdity and stands revealed as unequal to its original claim. In the end, theories, all theories (Buddhist theories included) fall to the ground through sheer inanity. No intellectual construction can withstand such analysis; the purpose of Madhyamaka is to reduce to total silence the restless, questing intellect, forever condemned to one-sidedness and a specific viewpoint. A mental stillness supervenes, and conceptual elaboration is annihilated, making possible an insight that lies beyond thought construction. This prepares the ground for the experience of *shūnyatā*, emptiness itself.** The position of Madhyamaka thus resembles the Kantian critique in modern Western philosophy, but as T. R. V. Murti suggests, it goes far beyond Kant in perceiving that criticism may itself yield wisdom and provide the ground for a spiritual path.

In his account, Shāntideva surveys the range of Madhyamaka arguments as these had been played out from Nāgārjuna until his own time. The ninth chapter of the *Bodhicharyāvatāra* thus presents an encyclopaedic overview, which is extremely useful for the understanding of the system itself. It devotes considerable space to the refutation of the realism of the Vaibhāshika and Sautrāntika schools, the belief in the ultimate existence of indivisible particles of matter and instants of consciousness. This was the prime object of Nāgārjuna's polemic. Then there is a dismantling of the theories of the early Hindu Sāṃkhya school, and a critique of the Mīmāṃsā and Nyāya-Vaisheṣhika schools of Indian philosophy, to which Nāgārjuna's great disciple Āryadeva devoted particular attention. This is complemented by a lengthy account of the (Buddhist) Vijñānavāda (in the sense of a tenet system), which is presented and refuted in the spirit of Chandrakīrti. Coming after Chandrakīrti, and apparently adopting his position with regard to the Mind Only school, Shāntideva is usually considered to belong to the Prāsaṅgika branch of the Madhyamaka school.

Even in the earlier chapters of the *Bodhicharyāvatāra*, well before turning explicitly to metaphysical questions, **it is evident that Shāntideva is constantly preoccupied with the view of emptiness and the implications of this in all aspects of the Bodhisattva path.** The questions he asks about the nature of mental defilements, at the end of chapter 4, and the sudden discussion of the self in chapter 6, to take just two examples, show that the philosophical perspective is always very close to the surface. And **the most remarkable feature of the ninth chapter, taken within the context of the *Bodhicharyāvatāra* as a whole, is that it shows that the wisdom of emptiness is not merely relevant to Bodhisattva training, it is actually indispensable. Shāntideva demonstrates that, far from being a matter of rarified metaphysics or academic discussion removed from the concerns of practical existence, Madhyamaka is fundamentally a vision and a way of life. It is the ultimate heart and soul of the Buddha's teaching. In the twenty or so stanzas at the end of the ninth chapter, Shāntideva shows how it is precisely the absence of this wisdom that lies at the root of saṃsāra and the sorrows of the world; and he poignantly concludes his message with verses of great beauty and pathos.**

> When shall I be able to allay and quench
> The dreadful heat of suffering's blazing fires
> With plenteous rains of my own bliss
> That pour torrential from my clouds of merit?
>
> My wealth of merit gathered in,
> With reverence but without conceptual target,
> When shall I reveal this truth of emptiness
> To those who go to ruin through belief in real existence? (9.166–167)

Nevertheless, it may be said that in certain circumstances negative emotions provide the occasion for a good result, **as when the cherishing of others arises through desire.** As the proverb says, "Foul sewage from the city of Serkya fertilises the fields of sugarcane." In fact, **the Bodhisattvas' real enemies, and the greatest hindrances in their work for others, are the obscurations that veil omniscience.** And **since these exist in the residual traces left by negative emotions, it follows that the latter must be abandoned before the obstacles to knowledge can be removed**.

Thus, **when Bodhisattvas meditate on emptiness, their aim is mainly to dispel these obstacles to knowledge. In order to do this, it is not enough simply to have an intellectual understanding of the subtle nature of things. The wisdom that dispels these obscurations must be supported by practices such as generosity and the other pāramitās.[47] The Buddha taught these different practices so that Bodhisattvas could attain the clear insight through which they might dispel obstacles to knowledge and then work for the benefit of others.**

[47] This is because the mind must be supported and strengthened by an enormous stock of merit in order to be able to realise emptiness.

In talking about generating wisdom to put an end to suffering, Shāntideva is referring to the suffering of *all* beings. After all, this text is about the activities of the Bodhisattva, and have we recently discussed what is wrong with cherishing oneself and why it is important to think of others?

When generosity etc are practiced as pāramitās, are practiced with an understanding that the subject, object, and the action itself are all devoid of true (inherent) existence, these acts become very profound and completely transcend ordinary generosity.

We should **note that Shāntideva talks about generosity first and places the topic of wisdom only at the end.** He had a reason for this. In the *Compendium of All Practices*, just before beginning his exposition of emptiness, he shows with numerous quotations from the sūtras that the Buddha himself, before broaching the same subject, would speak about the unattractiveness and impermanence of phenomena and about the nature of suffering. One might almost think that the world of phenomena was the main subject of his teaching, for it was only in conclusion that he would say that things have no true, objective existence. There was, however, an extremely important reason for his proceeding in this way. To begin with, he would discuss the positive and negative aspects of things, laying the ground for a clear understanding of the unfailing functioning of relative truth, according to which things do indeed exist. It was on the basis of their relative existence that the Buddha explained that phenomena are empty by their nature. Only where there is a basis is it possible to assert emptiness. As it is said: “Form is emptiness; emptiness is form.” Because there is form, we can talk about its nonexistence. If there were no form, there could not be emptiness of form. As there are phenomena that we can talk about as being empty, we say there is a basis for emptiness. Without that basis, emptiness would be inconceivable.

An explanation of the practices of the first five pāramitās, starting with generosity, gives us a clear view of the basis for emptiness.

When, for example, we practice generosity to remove for ourselves and others all suffering due to poverty, we are cognizant of the relative truth of cause and effect. When it is subsequently explained that, in absolute truth, all this is actually devoid of real existence, we are already firmly grounded in relative truth and are thus protected from erring into the philosophical extremes of nihilism or eternalism.

9.2.
Relative and ultimate,
These the two truths are declared to be.
The ultimate is not within the reach of intellect,
For intellect is said to be the relative.

A distinction is made, with regard to knowable things, between the relative (conventional) and the absolute (ultimate) truth. Absolute truth cannot be perceived by the intellect.

As we find in the *Prajñāpāramitā*:

The pāramitā of wisdom is inconceivable, inexpressible, and indescribable.
It is not born; it does not cease; it is like space.
Only the awakened mind can comprehend it.
Before the Mother of all the Buddhas, I bow down!

Again, the *Vajra Cutter Sūtra* says:

The absolute nature of the Buddhas,
The absolute body of the spiritual guides,
Cannot be understood by the intellect.

Shāntideva says **the reason for this is that the intellect is something that exists on the level of relative truth.** However, the interpretation of this point is delicate, because later in the text we shall read about another kind of intellect and intelligence. Shāntideva continues:

9.3.
In light of this, within the world, two kinds of people are observed:
Those with yogic insight and the common run of people.
In this regard, the views of ordinary folk
Are undermined by yogis who themselves are in the world

9.4.
(Within whose ranks
The lower, in degrees of insight, are confuted by the higher)
By means of the examples that the yogis and the worldly both accept.
And for the sake of the result, analysis is left aside.

When the text speaks about insight or intelligence, it is referring to the understanding of lack of true (inherent) existence. In the use of discriminating wisdom to analyse phenomena, the different schools gain different levels of this understanding, and those with more advanced philosophical views confute those with less advanced views.

Again, there are two kinds of discriminating wisdom. One discriminates things concerning relative truth, and the other discriminates things concerning absolute truth. Here in the text, insight, or intelligence, refers to discriminating wisdom that analyses the absolute nature of things and not intelligence in its more general sense concerning relative phenomena. And if the verse is considered in terms of the profound path and the vast path, it is the profound path that is referred to.

It is said in the *Entrance to the Middle Way*: "One who is at the level *further to go* has superior intelligence." When a Bodhisattva reaches the seventh level, which is called *further to go*, his intelligence surpasses that of a Shrāvakas or Pratyekabuddha. Until then, Bodhisattvas on the first level upward surpass the Shrāvakas and Pratyekabuddhas because of their *family*, not because of the power of their intelligence, or their understanding of emptiness.[48] Only when they reach the seventh level is their intelligence superior. It is also said that at this point they surpass the Shravakas and Pratyekabuddhas in their ability, in a single instant, to enter into and arise from the concentration of perfect cessation.

When Shāntideva says that absolute truth cannot be perceived by intellect, he is referring not to the intelligence that discerns absolute truth but to the obscured intelligence that conceives the dichotomy of subject and object. **Absolute truth is something that we have to experience with a mind free of concepts and in which there are no such dualistic notions. Relative truth is what is perceived by the conceptual, dualistic intelligence.**

The non-Buddhist traditions of ancient India also talked about absolute and relative truths. The Sāṃkhyas, for example, regarded the primal substance as absolute truth, and the rest of the twenty-five objects of knowledge (such as the Self) as relative truth. Even between the different Buddhist schools (the Vaibhāsṃhika, Sautrāntika, Chittamātrin and Mādhyamika) **the two truths are explained in slightly different ways.**

The term *relative* is sometimes called an obscuring truth and sometimes a conventional truth, depending on the context. And *absolute* truth can also have many different meanings. *The Treatise on the Centre and Extremes* speaks of absolute absolute truth, practiced absolute truth, and attained absolute truth. Again, in the supreme Mantrayāna one speaks of the absolute luminosity. Moreover, to explain the specific practices of the Mantrayāna, the two truths are explained in different ways. For example, the illusory and temporary aspect of phenomena is related to relative truth, while their aspect of primordial continuity is related to absolute truth.

So when we talk about the absolute truth, we should always do so with reference to the context, whether Sūtrayāna or Mantrayāna, and if Mantrayāna, to the particular tantra. We should then gain a precise understanding of absolute truth within that context. This is very important. If we try to apply only a general understanding of absolute truth to some specific text, we can get very confused.

It is said in the *Root Verses of the Middle Way* that the teachings of the Buddha rely on the two truths: the truth of the relative world and the supreme, absolute truth. This is explained in detail in the ***Entrance to the Middle Way,* which says that, as all phenomena are perceived both correctly and mistakenly, we apprehend their nature in two ways. What is correctly perceived is absolute truth, and what is perceived incorrectly is relative truth.** This refers to the findings of non-conceptual experience, related to absolute truth, and those of conceptual analysis, related to relative truth. It is on the basis of these that we establish our understanding of emptiness. But here we are only talking about the non-conceptual experience of the absolute truth. With this exception, the ways of distinguishing the truths are the same as in the *Entrance to the Middle Way*.

Why do we need to realise emptiness? We do not wish to suffer, and we know that the root of suffering is the untamed mind. Because the mind perceives and understands things mistakenly, negative emotions arise and the mind is never at peace. This is why we suffer. To avoid this, we must develop the unmistaken mind, the intelligence that perceives the true nature of phenomena. Mistaken perception arises because we fail to see things as they are.

Much of what we perceive we perceive in a mistaken way, seeing things not as they truly are. This is how we become deluded. To avoid this, we should not accept our perceptions just as we experience them. It is very important to analyse and investigate whether we are seeing things as they truly are. We should ask ourselves what our perceptions are masking. If we do this, an understanding of the two truths will arise in our minds.

All we perceive (mountains, houses, and so on) affect us in one way or another. We need to investigate their real nature. Our perceptions, and the positive and negative aspects that we attribute to them, constitute relative truth. Relative truth is what we find when we experience the multiplicity of phenomena in a relative way, without going any further in analysing their nature. The findings of the analysis by the conventional mind constitute relative truth.

[48] Because the Shrāvakas and Pratyekabuddhas seek liberation only for themselves, they are considered to be of inferior family to those who belong to the Bodhisattva family and strive for the enlightenment of all beings.

If, according to absolute truth, things have no true existence, why do we speak of relative truth as *truth*? Because it is true for the perceiver. It is true for the mind clouded by ignorance, which believes in the reality of its perceptions. As the *Entrance to the Middle Way* says, that which is altered and obscured by ignorance and is perceived as real is called relative truth.

For which mind is the multiplicity of phenomena true? It can only be the confused ignorant mind that believes that things exist objectively. The true nature of things is obscured by the mind's ignorant clinging to things and to the way they function. Thus, relative truth is based on the findings of the mind that examines things in a conventional way. If we analyse further and try to see the true nature of phenomena, we can find the ultimate nature of reality. Here we distinguish between the way things appear (relative truth) and the way they are (absolute truth), which is what is perceived by the undeluded mind.

There are two ways of approaching absolute truth: a positive idea of it can be gained through listening, reflecting, and meditating, and an understanding of it in terms of negation can be gained by analysis. It stands to reason that if one can find through analysis anything that truly exists, one should also be able to find it through listening, reflecting, and meditating. But the fact is, **what one can find through listening, reflecting, and meditating cannot be found by analysis. The absolute nature is something that can only be experienced through listening, reflecting, and meditating.** When one investigates the nature of the individual and of all phenomena, one finds that their nature is emptiness. This emptiness is an absolute truth that is apparent to the mind. One can see it with one's awareness. Once it has been experienced, it is not necessary to demonstrate it again. **By referring to one's experience of this nature, one can recall it. Its existence is true, and one does not have to rely on argument to prove that it exists. So when one has some confidence that no phenomena truly exist, one does not need to have this explained again or to repeat the investigation. This absolute nature that is established through listening, reflecting, and meditating is something we can experience.**

However, **when one looks for this absolute nature or emptiness, and tries to find where it is, one cannot find it. Its nature is nonexistent. When one makes the absolute nature (that one experienced through listening, reflecting, and meditating) the object of analysis, one cannot find it.** This is why it is called nonexistent by nature. To take an example, we can say that a vase has the nature of emptiness, but when we look for that emptiness, it is nonexistent. All we can find is the emptiness of emptiness, but we cannot find emptiness. What has been found by experiencing it through listening, reflecting, and meditating cannot be found through such analysis.

This is an important point. The understanding of absolute truth that comes from listening, reflecting, and meditating is something that exists and can be experienced. But in the absolute truth that appears through the analysis even of emptiness itself, there is nothing that exists.