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This publication is an Intermediate Level Nitartha book.

THE CENTER OF THE SUNLIT SKY
Madhyamaka in the Kagyü Tradition

Karl Bruhnholz

*Including a Translation of Pawa Rinpoche's Commentary
on the Knowledge Section of Śāntideva's The Entrance
to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life (Bodhicaryāvatāra)*

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merit is conjoined with the supreme knowledge that is free from the reference points of the three spheres (agent, object, and action).

In particular, in between our sessions, we train in the thirty-seven dharmas that concord with enlightenment.⁶⁶⁶ The enumeration of these thirty-seven factors in the great vehicle is the same as in the tradition of the hearers, but the focus is vaster and more profound. This may be illustrated through the first set of these thirty-seven, the fourfold application of mindfulness⁶⁶⁷ on the lesser path of accumulation. The hearers use this practice as a method for exploring the pervasiveness of suffering, impermanence, and the lack of a personal self. The great vehicle goes further and has us regard our body, our feelings, our mind, and all phenomena as being without any nature in order to cultivate an understanding that they are nonconceptual in essence. This is the profound aspect of these practices. In addition, we cultivate the recognition of our body as being like an illusion, our feelings as being like a dream, our mind as being like luminous space, and all phenomena as being like fleeting clouds. This represents the vast aspect of such fourfold mindfulness. In this way, we enhance our realization of the inseparability of appearance and emptiness. As we do so, all differences between meditative equipoise and subsequent attainment gradually vanish. When these two phases have become inseparable, the realization of true reality is unchanging in all situations, which is nothing other than Buddhahood.

How to Practice a Session of Analytical Meditation

A session of Buddhist analytical meditation starts with taking refuge in the three jewels and generating the mind of enlightenment. There follows a brief period of calm abiding to create the proper ground for engaging in the actual analysis. Then, within this state of calm abiding, we clearly bring to mind the particular object to be analyzed. This could be the first thing that comes to mind; however, especially when involved in training in the progressive stages of meditation on emptiness as outlined below, we should choose an object that suits our individual level in terms of our investigation of either personal or phenomenal identitylessness. As a guideline for our analysis, we mainly apply the reasonings and considerations described in the preceding discussions of twofold identitylessness and Centrist reasoning (such as the five great Centrist reasonings and the sevenfold reasoning using the analogy of a chariot).

As a preparatory step for beginners, it is fine to read through these reasonings one at a time, to recite them, and thus clearly bring them to mind. The idea is not just to echo such reasonings as if turning a prayer wheel or reciting a mantra but—once we are more familiar with them—to be a little bit more creative in our analytical approach. Our creativity and inspiration to engage in analysis will certainly not bloom if we regard analytical meditation as dry mental gymnastics

or the repetition of sterile formulas. Rather, Centrist analytical meditation is meant to provide the ground for experimenting with our basic curiosity and openness to investigate ourselves and the world around us. Thus, it is often quite helpful to consider what we actually want to know about this world and ourselves—what our real questions of immediate personal concern are—and then to apply Centrist principles of investigation, rather than to just follow the beaten path of standardized reasonings against standardized opponents as found in Centrist texts. For example, we may feel overworked and depressed, have an identity crisis, quarrel with our partner, see someone as our enemy, or be very happy and newly in love, or self-indulgent or proud—all these states can be scrutinized for their solidity and reality. This includes coming up with our own reasons, examples, and questions. Furthermore, instead of trying to prove emptiness or identitylessness, we may as well take the opposite route, looking for reasons that things really exist and then checking out whether these reasons withstand analysis.

Whichever approach we choose, it is important to pick a distinct object (such as our head or a chair), clearly bring it to mind, and then stay with it as our object of analysis until some degree of certainty as to its features—or the lack thereof—is achieved. This means that there is no point in just thinking in a general way, “All phenomena are empty,” or “Everything is beyond unity and multiplicity,” without really having a clear picture of any particular phenomenon, let alone all phenomena. Nor is it helpful to jump from one object to the next every few minutes without having gone any deeper. Especially in the beginning, it is very important to restrict our analysis to a rather limited portion of a given object or topic and to try to gain some certainty about it. This is accomplished through looking into it as thoroughly as possible. For example, if we feel that our head is not our self, we should not just leave it at this feeling but try to come up with as many reasons as we can find that explain why it is not the self, or to find the absurd consequences if indeed it were the self.

The next step is to go beyond conceptual analysis in order to gain incontrovertible, experiential certainty. Conceptual analysis (whether we use Centrist reasonings or another approach) will serve only to enhance our conceptual or intellectual certainty. Such analysis is important as a start, but it is not sufficient to affect the deeper levels of our latent tendencies of reification. Hence, we must proceed to absorb whatever degree of conceptual certainty we may have attained by resting in this certainty in a nonconceptual way that is free from reference points. Through this method, we familiarize our minds with the insights that we have gained through the preceding analysis. For example, once we have attained certainty that our head is not our self, we should stop analyzing but maintain one-pointed mindfulness and alertness and just let this certainty sink in deeply. If we feel that we have not gained any understanding or insight at all, we just practice

calm abiding for a while and then resume the analysis until some insight dawns. Especially at the beginning, such insights do not have to be great, profound insights into emptiness or what holds the world together. Rather, we may and should use any level of new understanding about our specific object of analysis.

When we rest the mind in this way and thus absorb our newly developed convictions, the analyzing facet of our mind naturally settles into mind's nature, just as a wave rolls back into the ocean or the space within a cup becomes one with the infinity of all space once the cup is broken. In this way, discriminating knowledge is also nothing but the unity of awareness and the expanse of dharmas, in which no traces of analyzing subject and analyzed object can be found. In this way, we allow for and cultivate a very lucid nonconceptual certainty on the level of immediate experience that gradually can become an intrinsic and natural part of our way of seeing the world and acting in it. In other words, this is the way to change our instinctive habits and to bring the understanding we have from our head into our heart.

What is the reason for alternating between analyzing and resting? In brief, each approach performs a different but mutually enhancing function. Analyzing means seeing through our useless grasping, while resting provides the space to adapt to this seeing. Through analytical meditation, we relinquish our many-layered conscious and unconscious reifying tendencies of holding on to a self and to things as really existent. The remedy for these tendencies is the irreversible certainty that there are neither real things nor a self. These two mental states—reification, which is to be relinquished, and certainty about emptiness as its remedy—are mutually exclusive and cannot exist in our mind at the same time, just as it is impossible to experience love and hatred simultaneously. Therefore, to whatever degree reification becomes gradually undermined through analysis, to that same degree certainty about emptiness increases.

Finally, even if we do not enhance such understanding through further explicit analysis, experiential certainty arises naturally through the power of having repeatedly cultivated it during the phases of analytical and resting meditation. At this point, other than just resting in this very state of the lucid presence of such certainty, there is no need to actively or deliberately redevelop it over again, since we have already accomplished this certainty through prior analysis. For example, when we have determined through close examination that a hose with a zigzag pattern is not a snake, this very certainty stops us from apprehending the hose as a snake. To continue to analyze the hose at this point and to keep telling ourselves, "It is not a snake" would seem pointless and foolish. However, we might need to take a minute to let that knowledge sink in and see the consequences of there being no snake in the hose. Then, once we have gained irreversible certainty that there is no snake and this conviction has become a natural part of our experience, the thought of such a hose being a snake will never cross our mind

again. We might even laugh at our own previous confusion the next time we happen to see a hose with zigzag pattern.

Thus, it is important not to do just a bit of analysis and then drop it, totally forgetting about any insights (however limited they may be) that we have gained through this analysis and shifting into mere calm abiding. In other words, analysis and calm abiding should not be alternated in a completely unrelated or arbitrary way. Rather, there should be some sense that the insights gained through analysis are being carried over into the phase of resting meditation. To facilitate bringing the analysis into the resting phase, it is helpful to briefly summarize the insight from our analysis in one sentence before engaging in the actual resting meditation. Beginners may want to briefly recall whatever insight has been obtained a few times during the resting meditation and then let it sink in again. After resting the mind in this way for a while, or when the mind starts to get dull, we resume our analysis of the same object. We do not have to start our analysis anew but can just continue from where we stopped before the resting meditation. Depending on how complete our analysis has been, we may also shift to another object at this point.

If in this process we get distracted and lose our focus on the object of analysis, we may initially try to gently bring our mind back to the object and continue investigating it. If, however, our analysis becomes discursive and the mind runs all over the place, or if we become too tired and thus cannot focus anymore, we should not push or strain. Strained analytical meditation deteriorates into mere ordinary thinking, in which one train of thought just follows after the other without leading anywhere. As long as there is precision, clarity, and mindfulness during the investigation, it is analytical meditation, but if these features are lacking, it is neither analysis nor meditation. Hence, when we become aware that our analysis loses these qualities, then it is definitely better to shift into a period of calm abiding. If that does not help either, we should simply take a break. Just sit and relax without trying to do any meditation at all for a while. After a while, we can resume the analysis where we left off while still in a state of clear focus. Another possibility at that point is to end the session altogether by dedicating all the positivity that arose from our meditation and come back for another session later. In between sessions, as described earlier, we engage in the illusionlike accumulation of merit while pursuing our everyday activities.

It is generally much better to meditate repeatedly for short periods with good concentration and wakefulness than to ineffectively prolong a state of distraction or mental fatigue and misconstrue this as meditation. The latter will eventually make us fed up with meditation. Thus, it is said that the best way to meditate is to start out by welcoming meditation like a dear old friend and to stop meditating while we are still good friends. If we end our session while still focused and awake, we will look forward to coming back to that state, but if we always

stop our session when we feel dull, distracted, or weary, this will not inspire us to return to our practice. It will only create bad habits for our meditation.

As a simple example to illustrate the process of analysis, let's use meditating on impermanence. After identifying an object to be analyzed for its impermanence, pick one of the many reasons that things are impermanent, such as that they are produced by causes and conditions. This argument looks at the process of objects arising through specific causes, their continuum being temporarily sustained through certain conditions, and their consequent ceasing once these conditions are no longer present. Assume the object chosen is an apple. Examine in a way that is as concrete and detailed as possible how this reason for impermanence applies to the individual causes and conditions of this apple, such as an apple tree, water, earth, sunshine, minerals, and so on. Trace back the origins of these factors themselves and find out how each one of them influences the arising, staying, and ceasing of this apple. When you feel convinced that this reason for impermanence applies to the apple, do not continue the analysis further. Initially, you may have gained only a somewhat more vivid and comprehensive picture of the many constantly changing factors that are involved in the appearance of such a fruit. Then, just let your mind rest one-pointedly in this certainty—or this wider picture of the apple's presence—and absorb it for a while without reflecting on its impermanence or anything else. This provides the initial opportunity for such an understanding to sink in to the deeper levels of your mind and thus create a much more powerful mental habit than just saying a few times, "This apple is impermanent." After a while, resume your analysis—continuing with either the same reason or another one—and thus repeat this shift from analytical to resting meditation and back several times. To conclude, it is recommended that you end the session with a brief period of calm abiding and then make the dedication. In later sessions, you can successively apply the same or other reasons to many other objects, be they various outer things unrelated to yourself, personal possessions, friends, relatives, or your own body and mind.

Obviously, this process of alternating analytical meditation and resting meditation has to be repeated many times in order to truly affect our strong tendencies to see things as really existent, lasting, and unchanging. The purpose of all this could be said to be "reprogramming our mental habitual patterns. Such is effected by gradually replacing concepts that are not in accord with basic reality—and thus produce suffering—with stronger tendencies of progressively refined concepts, finally leading to a direct experience of reality that relinquishes suffering. As the contemporary Kagyü master Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamso Rinpoche says, Buddhism is a system of increasingly subtle concepts that counteract relatively coarser concepts. However, this should certainly not be misunderstood to mean that we try to brainwash ourselves or make something up in our analytical meditation. It is not that we "make" things empty through our concepts or analy-

ses. Being empty is just their nature, whether we analyze them or not. Through the analytical approach, we proceed toward realizing for ourselves how things really are. If we do not apply essential Buddhist notions to the deeply ingrained habitual tendencies of our belief systems and only work with them on a superficial intellectual level, the teachings will be merely words without a deeper impact on our experiential world. As it is said, mind and dharma will not blend into one. This is especially important with such key Buddhist topics as emptiness, personal identity/lessness, and phenomenal identity/lessness, since it is precisely the instinctive assumption of a personal self and really existent phenomena that governs our experience and actions. To address these topics and make them personally relevant to our life cannot be accomplished without some degree of personal investigation, which entails honestly looking into our own view of the world and being willing to revise it.

Arisa's *Centrist Path Instructions, Called The Open Jewel Casket* highlights the essential points of the entire process:

One may wonder, "From where did all of this come in the first place, and to where does it depart now?" Once examined in this way, [one sees that] it neither comes from anywhere nor departs to anywhere. All inner and outer phenomena are just like that. Therefore, everything is the illusory magical display of one's own mind. It is appearing yet delusive, and delusive while appearing. Thus, all of it is contained in the body, and the [body] is again contained in the mind. As for the mind, it has no color and no shape. It is natural luminosity that is primordially unborn. The very knowledge that discriminates this is also luminosity. In this interval, consciousness is nothing whatsoever, does not abide as anything, is not established as anything, and has not arisen as any aspect, and all discursiveness without exception is completely at peace. This meditative concentration of space-vajra that is without appearance and in which the entire dust of characteristics has vanished is like the very center of the sky that is lit up by the autumn sun. In it, dwell as long as possible.⁶⁶⁸

The Progressive Stages of Meditation on Emptiness

The systematic, gradual succession of meditations that deal with personal and phenomenal identity/lessness is often called the progressive stages of meditation on emptiness.⁶⁶⁹ These stages are briefly outlined in the sūtras and further explained in Centrist texts such as Nāgārjuna's *Commentary on the Mind of Enlightenment* and his *Stages of Meditation*,⁶⁷⁰ Bhāvavivēka's *Jewel Lamp of Concentration*, Jñānagarbha's *Path of Yoga Meditation*, Kamalaśīla's *Stages of Meditation*

and *Entrance into Yoga Meditation*, Atiśa's two *Centrist Path Instructions*, Jñānakīrti's *Instructions on the Stages of Meditation of the Vehicle of Perfections* and *Entrance into True Reality*,⁶¹ and Vimalamitra's *Topics of Gradualist Meditation*.⁶² From among these, Kamalaśīla's three-volume *Stages of Meditation* gives by far the most detailed instructions. This text also calls the meditative progression "the stages of prajñā meditation."

To illustrate this gradual progression, Nāgārjuna begins his *Commentary on the Mind of Enlightenment*⁶³ by saying that bodhisattvas, after having generated the aspiring mind of enlightenment, should generate the ultimate mind of enlightenment through the power of meditation. Thus, he commits to explaining the meditation on this mind of enlightenment that destroys cyclic existence. The actual progression of this meditation starts with analyzing for the lack of a real personal identity. The reason to start with negating personal identity is that it represents the object of a coarser level of clinging to real existence than the clinging to a real identity of all phenomena. Accordingly, Nāgārjuna first shows that there is no personal self within the five aggregates, the twelve sources, and the eighteen constituents.

Next, Nāgārjuna turns to phenomenal identity/lessness. He negates the possibility of infinitesimal material particles—as asserted by various non-Buddhist schools as well as the Buddhist Followers of the Great Exposition and the Sūtra Followers—by showing that such particles can be broken up infinitely without any remaining indivisible core ever being found. As a consequence, Nāgārjuna states that whatever appears and is experienced is nothing but an appearance in one's own mind and that there are thus no outer material objects that are established as something other than or independent of mind. His text says:

As the entities of apprehender and apprehended,

The appearances of consciousness

Do not exist as outer objects

That are different from consciousness.

Therefore, in the sense of having the nature of entities,

In any case, outer objects do not exist.

It is these distinct appearances of consciousness

That appear as the aspect of form.

Just as people with dull minds

See illusions, mirages,

And the cities of scent-eaters,

So do form and such appear.⁶⁴

Nāgārjuna further emphasizes that the reason the Buddha taught the aggregates, sources, and constituents was solely to negate a personal self and not to establish what is contained within these aggregates and so on as really existing entities. The text continues:

The teachings on the aggregates, constituents, and so on

Are for the purpose of stopping the clinging to a self.

By settling in mere mind,

The greatly blessed ones let go of these too.⁶⁵

In the above four verses, Nāgārjuna clearly presents the intermediate step of realizing that all appearances occur solely within one's own mind as the expressions of this mind. However, just like all other Centrists, he does not stop at that point but—as the following verses and all his other texts show—negates the real existence of the mind as well. Candrakīrti's *Entrance into Centristism* also mentions this step as a help for those who do not immediately see that, just as all other appearances, the mind as their experienter is empty too:

The Buddhas said, "If there are no knowable objects,

One easily finds that a knower is excluded."

If knowable objects do not exist, the negation of a knower is established.

Therefore, they first negated knowable objects.⁶⁶

Thus, in terms of the view, Centrists make sure to refute all philosophical systems that assert any kind of truly established mind. At the same time, in the context of the progression of an individual's personal meditation and realization of emptiness on the path, the intermediate step of seeing that, just as in a dream, all appearances are nothing but mental images is considered crucial, for it eliminates the clinging to a solid and really existing material world that "leads a life of its own" apart from our perceiving mind. According to Centrists, the main reason the Buddha taught the three realms to be "mere mind" was in order to refute any kind of creator or agent that creates the world. Rather, everything in cyclic existence appears as the result of the karmic actions that originate and are experienced within the minds of individual sentient beings. Another reason for the expedient teachings on mere mind is to temporarily calm people's fear of the complete emptiness of all phenomena without any reference point to hold on to. As Nāgārjuna says:

The teaching of the Sage that

"All of these are mere mind"

Is for the sake of removing the fear of naïve beings
And not [meant] in terms of true reality.⁶⁷⁷

The third step in Nāgārjuna's analysis is that mind itself is also unarisen, without nature, and empty. He describes what this emptiness means and why the example of space is used to illustrate it.

It is without characteristics and unarisen,
Not existent, and free from the ways of speech.
Space, the mind of enlightenment,
And enlightenment have the characteristic of not being two.⁶⁷⁸

In his *Exposition of The Commentary on the Mind of Enlightenment*, the Fourth Shamapa Chökyl Tragba⁶⁷⁹ (1433–1524) explains this emptiness of mind. He starts by quoting the Indian master Śmṛti's commentary on Nāgārjuna's text:

Our own mind is primordially unarisen.
It has the nature of emptiness.
and continues:

This meaning of Madhyamaka in our own [Buddhist] system—as it is expressed in the lines [of Nāgārjuna's verse 46]—is extensively taught. [Madhyamaka or emptiness] means being without characteristics that define true reality. It [means] to be unarisen, since it is neither existent nor nonexistent. It is neither something existent that has already arisen nor something nonexistent that is not suitable to arise. It is free from being demonstrable through words and expressions by the [various] ways of speech. This [emptiness] has the characteristic that space as its suitable example, nonconceptual wisdom (the mind of enlightenment), and enlightenment that clearly realizes all phenomena in an unmistakable way are not two [that is, not different]. The meaning of this is as follows: Conventionally, space exists, but ultimately it is unobservable. Likewise, enlightenment exists on the seeming level, but ultimately it does not exist. Also the nonconceptual mind of enlightenment can be expressed in conventional terms, but it is without nature when analyzed. Therefore, the characteristics of these [three] are not different.⁶⁸⁰

Fourth, Nāgārjuna presents the defining characteristics of the proper meditation on emptiness and identifies three ways of misunderstanding emptiness.

The emptiness that is called “nonarising,”
“Emptiness,” and “identitylessness”
Is what inferior beings meditate on.
It is not the meditation on the [factual emptiness].

What has the characteristic of the stream
Of positive and negative thoughts being cut off
The Buddhas taught to be emptiness.
The other [emptinesses] they did not declare to be emptiness.

To abide without observing the mind
Is the characteristic of space.
Their meditation on emptiness
Is declared to be space meditation.⁶⁸¹

Chökyl Tragba comments:

One may wonder, “Is there a difference between being skilled and being unskilled in the way of meditating on emptiness?” [These verses] teach that there is a difference. [The three emptinesses as misunderstood by inferior beings] are the [kind of] emptiness that [merely] represents the lack of reality. They are called [1] “nonarising” of all phenomena, these being like sky-flowers,

[2] “Emptiness” that is a nonimplicative negation,
And [3] “identitylessness” even on the conventional level.⁶⁸²

Inferior beings are those of weak insight, which is to say those without much study or beginners who have not trained in knowledge. The emptiness in the sense of extinction on which they meditate in these [three] ways is not the meditation on this [factual] emptiness of true reality. . . .

Positivity means to abandon killing and such. Negativity means to engage in the karma of putting [others] down and so on. Or, positivity [can refer to] sharp knowledge that analyzes conceptuality, while negativity is its opposite, ignorance. [However, all] such thoughts are [just various forms of] clinging to characteristics in terms of the factors to be relinquished and their remedies. Only [the meditation on emptiness] that is characterized by the stream of [these thoughts] being cut off is what the Buddhas taught to be the supreme nonconceptual meditation on emptiness. They did not declare that [to meditate on] the

other [emptinesses listed above] is the meditation on emptiness and identitylessness.

Therefore, to abide within the state that is without observing any conceptual characteristics with regard to nonconceptual wisdom (the ultimate mind of enlightenment) refers to the characteristic of space that was explained above. Hence, the proper meditation of yogic practitioners on emptiness is declared to be the meditation that is nonconceptual like space. . . . This meditation that is praised by noble Nāgārjuna in such a way is proclaimed by some earlier and later Tibetans to be the meditation of the Chinese Hyashang. However, in this treatise, [Nāgārjuna] takes it to be the style of the great bodhisattvas.⁶⁸⁸

To summarize this quote, meditation on emptiness is mistaken when emptiness is misunderstood as (1) absolute nonexistence (such as the nonexistence of a sky-flower), (2) a mere nonimplicative negation, or (3) total identitylessness or utter nonexistence of things even on the conventional level.

Fifth, Nāgārjuna states that both cyclic existence (ignorance) and liberation (realization of true reality) occur within and depend on our mind. Thus, the meditation and realization of emptiness is not spacelike in the sense of a blank nothingness, but it is an open, nonreferential state of mind that is at the same time profoundly peaceful and blissful.

The seeming comes from afflictions and karma.

Karma originates from the mind.

The mind is constituted by latent tendencies.

Freedom from latent tendencies is bliss.

This blissful mind is peacefulness.

A peaceful mind will not be ignorant.

Not to be ignorant is the realization of true reality.

The realization of true reality is the attainment of liberation.⁶⁸⁸

Kamalaśīla's *Stages of Meditation* presents the exact same progression of meditation on emptiness but in a much more detailed way. The meditation likewise starts with personal identitylessness and then proceeds to phenomenal identitylessness. As a sūtra source for these stages of meditation, Kamalaśīla quotes three crucial verses from *The Sūtra of the Arrival in Lanika* for a brief overview and then explains them in detail:

By relying on mere mind,

One does not imagine outer objects.

By resting in the observed object of suchness,
One should go beyond mere mind too.

Going beyond mere mind,
One must even go beyond the nonappearance [of apprehender
and apprehended].

The yogic practitioner who rests in nonappearance
Sees the great vehicle.

This spontaneously present, peaceful resting
Is completely purified through aspiration prayers.

Genuine identityless wisdom

Sees by way of nonappearance.⁶⁸⁹

The meaning of this is as follows: First, yogic practitioners should analyze phenomena with form that are impured by others as outer objects, such as visible forms. "Is it that these are something other than consciousness, or is it consciousness itself that appears in this way? Is this just like in a dream?" Thus, they investigate infinitesimal particles external to consciousness. When these infinitesimal particles are examined as to their parts, yogic practitioners do not see such [outer] objects. Since they do not see them, they reflect, "All of these are mere mind, while outer objects do not exist." Thus, it has been said above:

By relying on mere mind,

One does not imagine outer objects.

This refers to relinquishing conceptions about phenomena that have form. For when one analyzes what [first seems to] possess the characteristic of being suitable to be observed, it is not observable. After one has investigated phenomena that have form, those that have no form should be investigated. Here, "mere mind" means that when there is nothing apprehended, an apprehender is not reasonable [either], because an apprehender depends on something apprehended. Therefore, the conclusion is that mind is devoid of something apprehended and an apprehender and is just without this pair [or nondual in this sense]. This is the characteristic of nonduality [on this level]. By resting in the observed object of suchness, you should go beyond mere mind too. Go far beyond [any] aspect of an apprehender and thus rest in the nonappearance of this pair [of apprehender and apprehended], that is, in consciousness without these two. Thus, having gone beyond

mere mind, go beyond even this consciousness without the appearance of this pair. Since it is not justified that entities arise from themselves or something other, apprehender and apprehended are nothing but delusive. Since such a [consciousness without apprehender and apprehended] does not exist apart from these two, it is also not real. Having examined [in this way], also abandon reification with respect to such a consciousness without this pair. This means that you should solely rest in the wisdom that is without [even] the appearance of non-dual wisdom. In other words, rest in the realization that all phenomena are without nature. Through [your] resting in this [realization], supreme true actuality and thereby nonconceptual meditative concentration are entered.

At the point when yogic practitioners rest within the wisdom that is without the appearance of nondual wisdom, they dwell on the path of seeing. Therefore, they see the great vehicle. Seeing genuine true reality is called the great vehicle. As for the seeing of genuine true reality, it is the very fact that there is nothing to be seen, when the light of perfect wisdom dawns through the examination of all phenomena with the eye of supreme knowledge. This is also expressed in the sūtras:

One may wonder, "What is seeing the ultimate?" It means that all phenomena are not seen.

Here, [the Buddha] talked about "not seeing" by having in mind that there is no such seeing [of any phenomenon]. However, this "not seeing" is not like not seeing when the conditions [for seeing] are incomplete (such as in a blind person and when closing one's eyes) or when one does not mentally engage [in seeing]. . . . It is through this sequence of meditation that one should meditate on the true reality [of all phenomena].⁶⁸⁶

These successive stages of Centrist meditation on emptiness represent the basic structure of Kamalaśīla's entire text. The major portions of his work consist of detailed elaborations on the various aspects of the above progression. Arīśa's *Centrist Fifth Instructions* agrees on the same outline:

Entities are of two kinds: those that possess form and those that are without form. Those that possess form are collections of infinitesimal particles. When these are analyzed and broken up in terms of their directional parts, not even their minutest [part] remains and they are

without any shape. Since they are just like space, they are not established. Or, they are free from unity and multiplicity. Thus, they are without color and utterly without appearance.

What is without form is the mind. As for that [mind], the past mind has [already] ceased and perished. The future mind has not [yet] arisen or originated. As for the present mind, it is also difficult to examine: It has no color and is without any shape. Since it is just like space, it is not established. Or, when analyzed and scrutinized with the weapon of reasoning, it is free from unity and multiplicity. In other words, it is unarisen. Or, [it may be said that] it is natural luminosity and so on. Therefore, one realizes that it is not established.

At the point when these two [what possesses form and what is without form] definitely do not exist and are not established as [having] any nature whatsoever, the very knowledge that discriminates them is not established either. . . . once all specifically characterized and generally characterized phenomena are established as nonexistent [through knowledge], this knowledge itself is without appearance, luminous, and not established as [having] any nature whatsoever. . . . For as long as neither characteristics nor the enemies and robbers of thoughts arise, consciousness should rest in such a [state]. When wishing to rise [from the meditation], slowly open the cross-legged position and stand up. Then, in an illusionlike frame of mind, perform as much positivity with body, speech, and mind as possible.⁶⁸⁷

These stages of meditation on emptiness by Nāgārjuna, Kamalaśīla, and Arīśa are presented here in detail to clearly put forth the standard outline of the Centrist approach to such meditation. In addition, the way in which these masters unfold this progression shows a clear continuity in what is known as the progressive stages of meditation on emptiness as they are explained in the Kagyü lineage.

The Kagyü version of such meditation on emptiness, as presented by Khenpo Tsaltrim Gyamso Rinpoche, names the above stages after certain Buddhist philosophical systems as they are presented in Tibetan Buddhism. His book *Progressive Stages of Meditation on Emptiness* lists the following five stages:

- 1) the hearers⁶⁸⁸
- 2) Cittamātra
- 3) Svātantrika
- 4) Prāsaṅgika
- 5) Shentong-Madhyamaka

These correspond respectively to meditating on

- 1) personal identitylessness
- 2) mere mind without the duality of an internal subject and external objects
- 3) emptiness as a spacelike nonimplicative negation
- 4) emptiness as utter freedom from discursiveness
- 5) emptiness and luminosity inseparable

As the book says at the outset, these stages are given the names of these schools, but in terms of actually practicing such analytical meditations, the point is not to ascertain these schools' precise positions nor to look for the exact historical and philosophical correspondences between these five stages and the views of the schools whose names they bear. The presentation of these stages is meant to be understood as a pedagogical model for the progression of the personal insights of a practitioner who meditates on emptiness. This is, for example, evident from many Autonomist texts in general and the quotes from *The Stages of Meditation* above, in which the Autonomists themselves say that the notion of emptiness as a mere nonimplicative negation has to be left behind. Moreover, Autonomists also emphasize the freedom from discursiveness and its inseparability from luminosity.⁶⁸⁹

So the crucial point here—and this cannot be overemphasized—is that the focus of this progressive meditation is not at all on what various people or schools say or think but on the development of experience and realization in the minds of individuals who are actually engaging in such meditation. Thus, these stages represent a succession from a coarse understanding to increasingly subtle and refined insights that culminate in the direct seeing of emptiness or true reality. Except for a few especially gifted persons, most people cannot immediately grasp—let alone fully realize—the more subtle aspects of the teachings on emptiness. Rather, they have to take a gradual approach by starting with the most fundamental issues and then proceeding to the subtle points, just as physicians do not start their careers by performing open-heart surgery but first study the anatomical and physiological basics. All the details of the very subtle states of mind during the more advanced stages of meditation on emptiness are not likely to be understood if we have not gone through the basic levels of this process. In other words, in order to be able to tackle our subtle mental obscurations and to see the true nature of our mind, we have to start with its coarser obscurations. Otherwise, we would not even be aware that we have these subtle obscurations, just as a person whose entire body is in severe pain due to cancer is not aware of a minor twinge that is caused by a little scratch on the back.

This progressive approach can also be compared to a treasure hunt. If we are told about a treasure somewhere under a finger-shaped rock in a remote place, we first have to get a large-scale map that shows us how to get to the area where this treasure lies. Then we need a small-scale map of that area. Eventually, hav-

ing arrived in the area in question, we have to find this particular fingerlike rock with our own eyes, dig up the treasure with our own hands, and enjoy its beauty with our own senses. In the same way, we are gradually guided toward the realization of emptiness, but in the end the true nature of our mind can be seen by nothing but this mind itself.

Since a number of books provide detailed instructions on how to proceed through these progressive stages of meditation, I will offer just a few practical remarks here.⁶⁹⁰ The above five stages as they are outlined in all the texts mentioned simply sketch the gradual dwindling of all our reference points in terms of personal and phenomenal kinds of real identity. This is just another way of saying that emptiness is initially understood on increasingly subtle, conceptual levels and finally directly realized.

The first step—the meditation on personal identitylessness, or looking for a self in relation to our five aggregates—can basically have two approaches. First, we may compare all the various parts of our five aggregates with what we spontaneously or experientially feel our self to be. We simply ask ourselves questions such as: Is my body my self? Is my head my self? Do I think that my mind is my self? Are my emotions my self? Are they controlled by my self? If so, how? For many of these questions, our spontaneous answer will be no. For example, during analysis, we do not feel that our self is limited to only our body or any of its parts. This simply is not our experience of “me.” However, when it comes to mind, emotions, and so on, the answer might not be that straightforward. When not sure, we should analyze further. We could ask: If our mind is our self, how exactly is that so? Is it our entire mind or just parts of it? Does this correspond to our experience of “me” in all situations?⁶⁹¹ By going deeper with our analysis, sooner or later we will inevitably hit the crucial question that actually should have been posed at the beginning of our search: What exactly is my self?

This leads us to the second, more systematic and thorough approach of investigation. In general, to compare two things, we must know what each of them is. We cannot really compare the five aggregates with our self if we do not know what this self is. So the next step is to try to define or describe our self. This process in itself is already very illuminating in terms of whether the self exists or not, since—apart from a definite “feeling” that we have a self—most people have a very hard time coming up with an exact description of what it might be. Paradoxically, one of the major reasons we are convinced that we have a self is that we don't actually know what it is or what it looks like. Since our sense of having a self is so vague, it is open to almost any kind of projection or identification. In fact, we constantly shift the objects on which we build this idea of a self. Sometimes we relate it more to our body, sometimes more to our thoughts, sometimes to our emotions, sometimes to our career, and so on. We tend to say such things as “I am sick,” “My head hurts,” “I am a doctor,” “I quit being a doc-

tor. "I think," "There are too many thoughts in my mind," "I am sad," or "My depression has worsened." All of these statements expose a variety of different ways of assuming and relating to an underlying self, yet we usually do not see the contradictions. Therefore, it is easy to take the existence of some underlying true "I" somewhere in our five aggregates for granted and to constantly refer to it.

As was said earlier, in Buddhism in general, a personal self is described as something that is single, lasting, and independent or in control. These are very general features that for most people apply to their sense of self. Usually, we think that we have a single self and not multiple selves; that this self has a lasting quality and does not constantly change; and that we are—more or less at least—in control of or independent in what we think and do. However, when doing the actual analysis here, it is very important to try to come up with our own description or definition that applies to our personal sense of self and corresponds to our actual experience of "me." Otherwise, we are just comparing our five aggregates with some vague general notion of self that has little to do with how we experience our own self in everyday life. Once we have found such a description—even if it is not completely satisfying—we should then see whether something can be found in our five aggregates that matches this identification of our self. To do this in a systematic way, we can use the sevenfold reasoning of a chariot that was explained earlier.

We may compare this analysis to searching a house for a lost car key. First, we have to know what this key looks like—otherwise, what are we looking for? We are not looking for just any key. We also have to know how many rooms the house has and where they are, including the basement and the attic. Then we can systematically go through each room, open all the closets and drawers, look under the beds, and so on. Once we are sure that this key is not in one room, we go on to the next. Finally, when we have not found it any place, we have to conclude that there is no such key in the house. As we probably all know, when searching for something, we sometimes remain unsure and think, "It must be here somewhere." Then we go back and repeat our search even more thoroughly. This may happen several times before we finally have no doubt that there is no key, since we have turned the whole house upside down. In a similar way, when we look for our self, we have to know what we are looking for, and we must clearly identify the places in which we are looking for it, that is, our five aggregates. If we do not search in every corner of them, or if we still have doubts as to whether there is something that corresponds to our individual notion of a self, we have to repeat our analysis until we are absolutely sure that there is no such self in our aggregates. If we still think there must be some self, we can go back and repeat the same search with an alternative description of what this self might be. In this way, we have to go through this process again and again until we never again experience

the slightest doubt that there is no personal self of any kind. This then is the realization of personal identitylessness.

The discussion up to this point has concerned the first step of the progressive stages of meditation on emptiness, the stage of the hearers who investigate the lack of a personal self. Now, from the second step (Cīrāmañña) onward, we deal only with phenomenal identitylessness. This second step of "mere mind" basically says that all our experiences, whatever they and their objects may look like, do not occur anywhere other than within our mind. In other words, both the apprehending subject and the apprehended object are of a mental nature. The analysis here involves two parts:

- 1) Through analysis, the existence of outer objects as anything other than mental experiences is negated.
- 2) The mediator rests in nondual experience without subject and object.

The first step—negating outer objects—is approached from three sides:

- 1) breaking them down into infinitely smaller pieces
- 2) analyzing the object and our perception of it on a causal time line
- 3) seeing the subjectivity of every appearance and experience

The issue of whether there are any really existing outer objects can be analyzed through an approach very similar to that of modern physics: by breaking up these objects into smaller and smaller parts without finding any indivisible core. If there are no identifiable external objects, we must conclude that what we experience as outer objects is nothing but a projection in our mind, just as in a dream, in which we also seem to experience outer objects while clearly there are none.

Second, the analysis focuses on whether there is any causal relation between objects and our perception of them. We consider that, in terms of our personal perception, we can only speak about the existence of an object once we perceive it. As long as we do not perceive it, we have no way of directly knowing whether there is such an object. Thus, it is obvious that what we call an object and the subjective consciousness that is aware of this object occur simultaneously. However, if there were outer objects that exist external to our mind and serve as the causes for our perception of them, they would have to exist before the perceptions that are their results. For, causes must precede their results in time and must also cease before the arising of these results. But if these outer objects existed before our perception of them, what would we perceive, since they are already gone at the time of this perception? This is the background for one of the two major reasonings that are used in this context of denying outer objects, which is called "the invariable co-observation"⁷⁶² of appearances and mind.

The third approach focuses on the subjectivity of perception. If we consider what exactly we know of objects, then we see that every perception is only a subjective experience in our mind as the perceiver. If we touch or smell a rose, "its softness" or "its fragrance" is nothing but our mental experience of softness or fragrance. This accords well with what modern science says: that there is no other or "objective" softness and fragrance apart from what we subjectively experience. It is this fact that is expressed by the second major reasoning concerning the nonexistence of outer objects, which is called "invariable sameness of appearances and mind as the nature of mere lucidity."⁶⁹ It says that there are no objects outside of the mind, because all our perceptions and what they perceive are alike in that they are nothing but immaterial clear appearances in our mind. In other words, objects are not different from the cognizing consciousness because of the very fact of being cognized. The reason is that consciousness—lucid awareness that neither consists of particles nor has spatial extension—can only cognize what has the same nature as consciousness, but not some material objects that have an altogether different nature (that is, lacking cognizance, consisting of particles, and possessing spatial dimensions). Consequently, objects in a dream and in the waking state are not fundamentally different. Both seem to perform their functions in their respective contexts, but in actual fact, none of them is really existent as something separate from our experience. This is not to deny that the objects of our perceptions appear to us as if they existed externally. However, apart from the fact that it subjectively appears this way, there is no evidence that there really are external objects in any way other than what appears as such objects in the mind. The relatively greater stability and regularity of daytime appearances in comparison to, for example, appearances in a dream, is said to be experienced only because of comparatively more stable and regular patterns of habitual tendencies for such appearances in our minds.

In the second part of the stage of "mere mind," the mediator rests in the nondual experience of the lack of subject and object. If there are no really existent objects, neither is there a really existent corresponding subject that perceives them. However, since our mind is not just nothing but is full of experiences, clarity, and movement, the meditation and realization of this step is said to be resting in bare mental experience without the duality of subject and object.

The third step in the progressive stages of meditation on emptiness is named after the Autonomists and refers to emptiness as a spacelike nonimplicative negation. Even if we realize that there are neither really existent outer objects nor subjects to perceive them, there is still the subtle clinging to the reality of our mere mental experience free from perceiver and perceived. Therefore, through the five great Centrist reasonings and such, we proceed to the stage of seeing that this lucid momentary experience too is empty of an intrinsic nature. Thus, starting with our self, we find neither any material objects nor mental subjects nor a bare

experience free from duality. This nonfinding of all phenomena, or the absence of an inherent real nature of all phenomena—a nonimplicative negation—is then the object of our meditation in the third stage.

The fourth step in the progressive stages of meditation on emptiness is called the stage of Consequentialists and presents emptiness as utter freedom from discursiveness. As was explained, any nonimplicative negation is still a conceptual object and thus a reference point. So even the nonimplicative negation of emptiness in the sense of the mere absence of a real nature, nonarising, and such (as in the third step) is still a subtle reference point. In order for our mind to be able to fully relax within the space of the expanse of dharma free from center or edge, it has to let go of even its most subtle grasping at any reference point including the freedom from reference points. This is the space of the actual freedom from all discursiveness that we allow for during the fourth step.

The fifth step in the progressive stages of meditation on emptiness is named after Shentong-Madhyamaka and presents emptiness as inseparable from mind's luminosity. Since the very freedom from discursiveness and reference points described in the last step is not just some blank space or mere absence (which would be the extreme of extinction or nihilism), it is also described as luminosity, or the unity of wisdom and expanse. Hence, in terms of the actual nature of mind, the fifth stage is not really an additional or higher stage above the freedom from discursiveness. As Sakya Pandita says in his *Distinction of the Three Vows*, the very attempt to go higher or beyond the freedom from all reference points would just mean to fall out of nonreferentiality by inevitably creating a reference point again.^{69a} Thus, the fourth and fifth stages indicate the two aspects of the nature of our mind, which is the undifferentiable unity of the freedom from discursiveness and luminosity. *Moonbeams of Mahāmudrā* also highlights the eventual experiential unity of the last two steps:

There are many ways in which mind is similar to space, but here this refers to the following: When one analyzes through discriminating knowledge, finally, also the very [process of] discrimination subsides, upon which [the mind] becomes pure as [a state of] nonconceptuality, just as seeing ceases through looking at space. As Tilopa says:

For example, through looking at space, seeing will cease.
Likewise, when mind is looking at mind,

The collection of thoughts ceases and unsurpassable enlightenment
is attained^{69b}

First, one analyzes [the mind] through discriminating knowledge. It is explained that, through this, the very [process of] discrimination itself

subsides, upon which nonconceptual wisdom dawns. You may then wonder whether there is some difference between mind and space. Yes, there is, since space is not a cognition that personally experiences itself. When mind is realized, this in itself is explained to be personally experienced wisdom.⁶⁹⁶

In summary, we could outline the progression of our experiences and realizations while meditating on emptiness in this way as follows. We start with the meditation and realization of personal identitylessness. Then, in terms of phenomenal identitylessness, we proceed from the coarse notion of real outer objects via the more subtle notions of mere nondual mental experience and emptiness as a nonimplicative negation all the way up—or rather back—to just letting our mind be in its natural state of nonreferential freedom, unconditionally aware of its own radiant display.

Mental Nonengagement in Meditation

One of the main issues in the well-known debate at Samye, where the Indian master Kamalaśīla is said to have defeated his Chinese opponent Hwashang Mahāyāna, was whether meditation on the ultimate is to be understood as just letting the mind settle in a state that is completely without any thought or focus or whether analysis and some focus are required. This is related to the question of whether progress on the path is gradual or instantaneous. Since that time, the designation “Hwashang meditation” has become Tibetan shorthand for an exclusive cultivation of a thought-free mental state as representing the realization of the ultimate. It goes along with a complete rejection of the aspect of means, such as the accumulation of merit and proper ethical conduct. It was after this debate that Kamalaśīla wrote his *Sages of Meditation* in order to clarify such issues by establishing the gradualist approach and describing in detail how to train in meditation on emptiness. Despite the different accounts of what the view of the Chinese master Hwashang really was and what exactly happened during the debate at Samye, all of its issues continued to be major points of controversy between the different schools of Tibetan Buddhism.⁶⁹⁷

One of the key terms in the context of how to properly cultivate meditation on emptiness is what is called “mental nonengagement.” Pawo Rinpoche summarizes the correct understanding of mental nonengagement:

Its meaning is to rest one-pointedly on the focal object [of meditation], without being distracted by other thoughts. If this [one-pointed resting] were stopped, all meditative concentrations would stop. Therefore, in general, “mental nonengagement” has the meaning of not

mentally engaging in any object other than the very focus of the [respective] meditative concentration. In particular, when focusing on the ultimate, [mental nonengagement] has the meaning of letting [the mind] be without even apprehending this “ultimate.” However, this should not be understood as being similar to having fallen asleep.⁶⁹⁸

Since this term is also frequently used in the Mahāmudrā and Dzogchen teachings, other schools mistakenly equate the correct notion of mental nonengagement with the stereotypic Hwashang meditation and thus deprecate the meditation styles of these two systems as being just some mindless state of spacing out.

More important, though, the notion of mental nonengagement, or mental disengagement, is intimately connected to the relationship between analytical and resting meditation as discussed above. Ultimately, mental nonengagement indicates nothing but the subjective side of what is called freedom from discursiveness. In other words, the only way in which the mind can truly engage in this “object” that is the absence of any object or reference point is precisely by not engaging in any object, that is, not creating any reference points. The absence of reference points can only be realized by a nonreferential mind, since this is the only perceptual mode that exactly corresponds to it. That this is not an invention by later schools or a mistaken approach to meditation is clearly demonstrated by numerous passages in the sūtras. For example, *The Sūtra Requested by Ocean of Intelligent Inquiry*⁶⁹⁹ states:

Do not mentally engage in phenomena.
Completely abandon doing anything further.
Realize all phenomena
As equality in true reality.

What is taught is the application of mindfulness
Without mindfulness or something to be mentally engaged.

The Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra in Eight Thousand Lines agrees:

This meditation on the perfection of knowledge means not meditating on any phenomenon.⁷⁰⁰

Artīśa’s autocomentary on *The Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment* quotes Nāgārjuna:

Nor imagined by imagination,
Mind completely nonabiding,