

Study and Practice of Meditation

Tibetan Interpretations of the Concentrations
and Formless Absorptions

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Chart 2: *Objects of Observation*

(Objects of observation in *italics* are considered suitable for beginners.)

THE FOUR TYPES OF OBJECT OF OBSERVATION (from the *Sūtra Unraveling the Thought*, Asaṅga's *Grounds of Hearers*, and Kamalashīla's *Stages of Meditation*)

- 1 Pervasive objects of observation
 - a. Non-analytical image
 - b. Analytical image
 - c. Observing the limits of phenomena
 - (1) the varieties (conventional phenomena)
 - (2) the mode (their emptiness)
 - d. Thorough achievement of the purpose
- 2 *Objects of observation for purifying behavior*
 - a. *The unpleasant: for persons in whom desire predominates*
 - b. *Love: for persons in whom hatred predominates*
 - c. *Dependent-arising: for persons in whom obscuration predominates*
 - d. *The divisions of the constituents: for persons in whom pride predominates*
 - e. *The exhalation and inhalation of the breath: for persons in whom discursiveness predominates*
- 3 Objects of observation for [developing] skill
 - a. The aggregates
 - b. The constituents
 - c. The twelve sources
 - d. The twelve-linked dependent-arising
 - e. The appropriate and the inappropriate
- 4 Objects of observation for purifying afflictive emotions
 - a. Those having the aspect of grossness/peacefulness
 - b. Those having the aspect of the truths

OTHER OBJECTS OF OBSERVATION

A Buddha's body

One's own mind

OBJECTS OF OBSERVATION USED IN TANTRA

A divine body (visualization of oneself as having a divine body)

Subtle drops

becomes impossible: the predominant afflictive emotion arises in the meditator's mind whenever he or she tries to focus on the body of a Buddha. This type of impasse usually occurs at the third mental abiding—that is, at the third of the sequence of nine states of mind through which a meditator progresses in order to achieve calm abiding. At that time, the meditator must change to the object of observation that is the appropriate antidote to the predominant afflictive emotion.^a

THE CLASSIC LAYOUT

Ge-luk presentations of objects of observation classically begin with the four types of object of observation set forth in the *Sūtra Unraveling the Thought* and explained, with slight differences in interpretation, in Asaṅga's *Grounds of Hearers* and Kamalashīla's *Stages of Meditation*. The four are:

- 1 Pervasive objects of observation (*khyab pa'i dmigs pa, vyāpyālam-bana*)
- 2 Objects of observation for purifying behavior (*spyad pa rnam sbyong gi dmigs pa, caritaviśodanālam-bana*)
- 3 Objects of observation for [developing] skill (*mkhas pa'i dmigs pa, mkhas par byed pa'i dmigs pa, kauśalyālam-bana*)
- 4 Objects of observation for purifying afflictive emotions (*nyon mongs rnam sbyong gi dmigs pa, kleśaviśodanālam-bana*)

That these overlapping categories, though classic, are of little practical importance is suggested by Kön-chok-jik-may-wang-po's omission of the complete presentation; he merely refers to “the four, pervasive objects of observation, and so forth.”^b

According to Gedün Lodrö, pervasive objects of observation get their name from their etymology, since “this type pervades all objects of observation”—that is, “all objects are included among them.”^c Objects of observation for purifying behavior “are named for their ability to pacify afflictive emotions temporarily” and are used by meditators who are dominated by one of the five predominant afflictive emotions that prevent the attainment of calm abiding.^d Objects of observation for developing skill are objects of observation that increase a meditator's

^a Ibid., p. 147.

^b Kön-chok-jik-may-wang-po, *Condensed Statement*, 557.5.

^c Gedün Lodrö, pp. 78, 89.

^d Ibid., p. 78.

skill. Gedün Lodrö explains that *mkhas pa'i dmigs pa* (literally, “objects of skill”) is “an abbreviated expression meaning ‘to make or bring about skill’ (*mkhas par byed pa'i dmigs pa*).” Objects of observation for [developing] skill, such as the twelve-linked dependent-arising, require detailed study; by meditating on them, a meditator becomes skilled in them.^a Objects of observation for purifying afflictive emotions cause the meditator to separate from the afflictive emotions pertaining to specific cosmological levels—“either the Desire Realm or the upper two realms, the Form and Formless Realms”—or a specific level within the Form or Formless Realms, such as the First Concentration. Unlike the objects of observation for purifying behavior, which pacify specific afflictive emotions that prevent the attainment of calm abiding, objects of observation for purifying afflictive emotions pacify equally all the afflictive emotions of a given level.^b They are generally explained in the context of the preparations for the first concentration.

The English term “objects of observation for purifying afflictive emotions” requires some comment, since, clearly, these objects of observation do not purify afflictive emotions in the same sense in which objects of observation for purifying behavior purify behavior—that is, by getting rid of impure behaviors; in the case of objects of observation for purifying afflictive emotions, the meditator does not get rid of impure afflictive emotions and end up with pure afflictive emotions. In English, one has to say that both types of object of observation, in different ways, purify the meditator of certain afflictive emotions. The Tibetan and Sanskrit words translated as “purifying” (*rnam sbyong*, *viśodana*) have both meanings; they can take as their direct object both that which is being made pure and the impurities that are being expelled, but in English, one does not “purify” impurities to get rid of them. However, the word “purify” is being used in that sense here to keep the flavor of the Tibetan and Sanskrit terms.

PERVASIVE OBJECTS OF OBSERVATION

There are four divisions of pervasive objects of observation:

- 1 Analytical image (*rnam par rtog pa dang bcas pa'i gzugs brnyan*, *savikalpikapratibimba*)
- 2 Non-analytical image (*rnam par mi rtog pa'i gzugs brnyan*, *nirvikalpakapratibimba*)

^a Ibid., pp. 78–79.

^b Ibid., p. 79.

- 3 Observing the limits of phenomena (*dnegos po'i mtha' la dmigs pa, vastvantālabana*)
- 4 Thorough achievement of the purpose (*dgos pa yongs su grub pa, kṛt-yānuṣṭāna*)

It is generally said that the first two are posited from the point of view of the subject and the last two, from that of the object.^a However, Gedün Lodrö gives a presentation of the third, observing the limits of phenomena, from the point of view of both object and subject.^b (See page 90.)

The two images. The terms *rnam par rtog pa* (*savikalpaka*) and *rnam par mi rtog pa* (*nirvikalpaka*) are usually translated as “conceptual” and “non-conceptual,” respectively. In this context, however, they are translated, respectively, as “analytical” and “non-analytical.” There are two explanations of the meaning of “analytical” and “non-analytical,” to be discussed below (see pages 88–90).

The term *gzugs brnyan* (*pratibimba*) means image or reflection, such as a reflection in a mirror. According to Kōn-chok-jik-may-wang-po, “‘image’...refers to the dawning of the object.”^c The present Dalai Lama explains this dawning of the object as, for instance, the visualized image of the body of a Buddha that has been “found” as a result of previous study of an image seen with the eye consciousness: “This image is called a ‘reflection’, and is the object of observation.”^d Gedün Lodrö explains that these two types of object of observation are called images “because the varieties of objects of observation are not observed nakedly but are perceived by means of an image.” He points out that this image is what Dharmakīrti’s *Commentary on (Dignāga’s) “Compilation of Prime Cognition”* calls a meaning-generality (*don spyi, arthasāmānya*), or generic image.^e

Hopkins notes that, since all images are conceptual, “conceptual” and “non-conceptual” are interpreted as “analytical” and

^a Gedün Lodrö, p. 81. Kōn-chok-jik-may-wang-po, *Condensed Statement*, posits “the two images from the point of view of the observing [consciousness, observing] the limits of phenomena from the point of view of the object observed, and thorough achievement of the purpose from the point of view of the fruit” (Kōn-chok-jik-may-wang-po, *Condensed Statement*, 557.5–6).

^b Gedün Lodrö, pp. 86–87.

^c Kōn-chok-jik-may-wang-po, *Condensed Statement*, 557.6.

^d *Kindness, Clarity, and Insight*, p. 185

^e Gedün Lodrö, p. 82.

“non-analytical,” respectively.^a According to the Fifth Dalai Lama:

It is said indeed that on the occasion of calm abiding non-conceptuality is needed and that the intellect should be stopped. These statements mean that the mind should not spread to thought other than the object of [observation], such as the body of a Buddha. If (in calm abiding) it were necessary to stop all conceptuality, then, since the contemplation of an image of a Tathāgata’s body is conceptual, such contemplation would also have to cease, and in that case you would lose your object of [observation].^b

In the *Sūtra Unraveling the Thought* and Asaṅga’s *Grounds of Hearers*, the two images are listed in the order given here.^c They are explained in terms of analytical and stabilizing meditation. According to Gedün Lodrö, these texts “say that because calm abiding is mainly a case of stabilizing meditation, it is non-analytical, and because special insight is mainly a case of analytical meditation, it is analytical.”^d

Kamalashīla’s *Stages of Meditation*, which Gedün Lodrö appears to prefer, lists the non-analytical image first and explains the two images differently. According to Kamalashīla, meditation in the style of a non-analytical image “is so called because it does not analyze the mode of phenomena (their nature or emptiness) but, rather, is a type of calm abiding that takes as its object the varieties (that is, conventional phenomena),” whereas meditation in the style of an analytical image “involves special insight taking to mind (or analyzing) the nature of phenomena”—that is, their emptiness.^e

Gedün Lodrö, for whom both texts are authoritative, holds that the presentations of Asaṅga and Kamalashīla are not inconsistent. He explains that for Kamalashīla, as for Asaṅga, a non-analytical image is an object of observation for calm abiding and an analytical image is an object of observation for special insight. According to Gedün Lodrö, both presentations are based on the mode of procedure of beginners and the order of achieving calm abiding and special insight, since the former is achieved before the latter. Kamalashīla’s presentation accords with this

^a Oral communication.

^b Fifth Dalai Lama, *Practice of Emptiness: The Perfection of Wisdom Chapter of the Fifth Dalai Lama’s “Sacred Word of Mañjuśrī”* (Dharamsala: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 1974), p. 18.

^c Gedün Lodrö, pp. 81, 84–85.

^d Ibid., p. 84.

^e Ibid., pp. 81, 82.

mode of procedure in that almost all beginners take a conventional phenomenon as their object of observation for achieving calm abiding and then, when calm abiding has been achieved, can take emptiness as their object of observation for achieving special insight. Asaṅga's presentation also accords with this mode of procedure, since "[w]hether one is observing the mode or the varieties, as a beginner one first mainly practices stabilizing meditation and then, once calm abiding has been achieved, cultivates analytical meditation and thereby achieves special insight."^a

Observing the limits of phenomena. As was mentioned earlier (page 88), observing the limits of phenomena is usually posited in terms of the object.^b According to Lati Rinpoche, "'limits of phenomena' refers to the two types, the varieties (*ji snyed pa*) and the mode (*ji lta ba*)"—that is, to conventional phenomena and their emptinesses; phenomena of both types can serve as objects of observation.^c Thus, this category, in itself, includes all objects of observation.

According to Gedün Lodrö, however, the limit of phenomena "can be posited from the viewpoint of either the object or the subject." Giving what he presents as the Prāsaṅgika position, he explains that, in terms of the object, the limit of phenomena is only the mode:

The impermanence of sound is not a limit of phenomena. The limit of phenomena is their not existing from their own side, which is the mode of subsistence (*gnas lugs*) of all phenomena whatsoever.^d

From the viewpoint of the subject, the limit of phenomena is observed at the time of the direct realization of emptiness—presumably, a Bodhisattva's direct realization of emptiness, since Gedün Lodrö states that "the *path* of observing the limits of phenomena is simultaneous with attainment of the first Bodhisattva ground" and, therefore, with attainment of the Mahāyāna path of seeing. Thus, an inferential cognition of emptiness does not observe the limit of phenomena.^e

Thorough achievement of the purpose. Thorough achievement of the purpose is presented in terms of the fruit, that is to say, the result of meditation. According to Lati Rinpoche,

^a Ibid., p. 85.

^b Ibid., p. 81.

^c *Meditative States*, p. 81.

^d Gedün Lodrö, p. 86.

^e Ibid., p. 86.

thorough achievement of the purpose refers not to the object of observation but to the purpose for which one is meditating; this class includes all the fruits of meditative stabilization from liberation up to the omniscience of a Buddha.^a

Thus, it includes both the final purpose, Buddhahood, and temporary purposes beginning with liberation from cyclic existence.

Gedün Lodrö gives a somewhat different explanation, without stating his source. According to him, “thorough achievement of the purpose” refers only to the final purpose, a Buddha’s Nature Body (*ngo bo nyid sku, svabhāvikakāya*). He holds that a Buddha’s Nature Body *can* be taken as an object of observation by non-Buddhas for the sake of attaining calm abiding, special insight, and the Bodhisattva grounds, and that a first-ground Bodhisattva, who has directly realized emptiness and, thereby, “has generated the *path* observing the limit of phenomena in his or her own continuum...can take a Nature Body as his or her object of observation and thereby achieve Buddhahood.”^b

How these four pervade all phenomena. As was mentioned earlier (page 86), pervasive objects of observation are so called because “this type pervades” or includes “all objects of observation”^c According to Kamalashīla’s explanation of the two images, the non-analytical image “includes all varieties of conventional phenomena”; therefore, it includes, for example, the objects of observation for purifying behavior. Gedün Lodrö points out that the analytical image, as well as the last two types of pervasive object of observation, “involve emptiness,” and that “emptiness is also classified as an object of observation for purifying afflictive emotions.”^d

If one follows Asaṅga’s interpretation of the two images, one could probably say that both conventional phenomena and their emptinesses—that is, all phenomena—can be objects of observation of both analytical and stabilizing meditation.

If one understands the limits of phenomena as including both conventional phenomena and their emptinesses (see page 90), one would have to say that it too includes all phenomena. According to the Lo-sel-ling scholar Kensur Yeshey Tupden, it includes the five objects of observation for purifying behavior, the five objects of observation for

^a *Meditative States*, p. 82.

^b Gedün Lodrö, p. 92 (emphasis added).

^c *Ibid.*, p. 78.

^d *Ibid.*, p. 89.