

मध्वाज्ञाविस्तारबालिवायवृत्तिनाम विद्वति स्म

དབུས་དང་མཐའ་རྣམ་པར་འབྱེད་པའི་ཚིག་ཡེ་ཤུར་བྱས་པའི་མཆན་  
འགྲེལ་ཞེས་བྱ་བ་བཞུགས་སོ

बधिमात्तानाम मध्वाज्ञाविस्तारस्य ज्ञानस्य स्तीर्षा विद्वति स्म

དབུས་དང་མཐའ་རྣམ་པར་འབྱེད་པའི་བསྟན་བཅོས་ཀྱི་འགྲེལ་བ་  
འོད་ཟེར་ཕྱེད་བ་ཞེས་བྱ་བ་བཞུགས་སོ

# MAITREYA'S DISTINGUISHING THE MIDDLE FROM EXTREMES

elucidated by

SHENPHEN NANGWA

*Annotation-commentary on the Stanzas  
on Distinguishing the Middle from Extremes*

and

JU MIPHAM

*Garland of Radiant Light — A Commentary  
on the Treatise Distinguishing the Middle from Extremes*



The light rays of your love pervade the entire expanse of space,  
Awakening the intelligence of wandering beings.  
Homage to you, Victorious One, Kinsman of the Sun,<sup>20</sup>  
And to your spiritual heirs, Maitreya and Mañjuśrī.

Here I shall correctly explain the words and meanings  
Of *Distinguishing the Middle from Extremes*—a treatise unconfined  
By the extremes of existence, non-existence, permanence and  
annihilation;  
An approach that reveals the genuine, excellent path of the noble  
ones.

*Distinguishing the Middle from Extremes* is one of the five great treatises of the Regent,<sup>21</sup> the supreme Bodhisattva of the tenth ground. It explains the profound key points of the entire path of the Great and Lesser Vehicles and reveals reality, free of dualistic extremes. The treatise will be explained under four headings:

- 1) The meaning of the title
- 2) The translator's homage
- 3) The meaning of the scripture
- 4) The meaning of the conclusion

## THE TITLE

**In the Indian language:** *Madhyāntavibhāgākārikā*.

**In the Tibetan language:** *Stanzas on Distinguishing the Middle from Extremes*.<sup>22</sup>

The first topic addresses the meaning of the title. When translated, the Sanskrit term *madhyānta* becomes “middle and extremes.”<sup>23</sup> *Vibhāga*<sup>24</sup> is translated as “distinguishing”<sup>25</sup> and *kārikā* as “stanzas on.”<sup>26</sup> Thus, it is the

treatise that correctly “distinguishes” the “extremes” of permanence and annihilation from the “middle”—reality free from extremes. “Stanzas on” specifies that the entire text is composed in verse.

## THE TRANSLATOR’S HOMAGE

On the second topic, the treatise states:

Homage to the youthful Mañjuśrī!

## THE MEANING OF THE SCRIPTURE

The third topic is the meaning of the scripture, which includes two divisions:

- 1) A summary using headings
- 2) A detailed explanation of the meaning of these headings

## SUMMARY

On the first topic, the treatise states:

**Characteristics, obscurations,  
Reality, cultivation of remedies,  
The bases for this, attainment of the fruition,  
And the Unsurpassable Vehicle.**

[The treatise] opens by presenting the body of the treatise: **characteristics, obscurations, reality, the cultivation of remedies, the bases for this cultivation, attainment of the fruition, and the Unsurpassable Vehicle.**

The entire meaning of the text, from beginning to end, is grouped into seven topics. The characteristics of thorough affliction and complete purification are the first topic and are what is to be comprehended. Obscurations, the second topic, are taught next, as their elimination leads to the attainment of complete purification. The third topic is reality,

which when observed brings about the elimination of these obscurations. The way in which the remedies are cultivated in relation to the observation of reality is taught as the fourth topic. The fifth topic is comprised of the occasions when the remedies arise in one's mind stream, while the sixth concerns the fruition that is achieved by cultivating these remedies. The seventh topic concerns the unique path that leads to the attainment of buddhahood, which is taught by highlighting the distinctive features of the unsurpassed vehicle.

### DETAILED EXPLANATION

The second section contains a detailed explanation of these seven topics. This includes:

- 1) A general perspective on that which is to be understood
- 2) The unique approach of the Great Vehicle

The general perspective on objects of cognition is further divided into:

- 1) The objects that are cognized
- 2) The path of practice
- 3) The fruition of the path

The discussion of the objects that are cognized covers:

- 1) The characteristics of objects of cognition
- 2) The obscurations that are eliminated
- 3) The reality that is realized

The first of these, the characteristics of objects of cognition, is divided into:

- 1) The characteristics of thorough affliction
- 2) The characteristics of complete purification

The characteristics of thorough affliction are discussed in terms of:

- 1) The essence of thorough affliction
- 2) How affliction occurs

The first topic, the essence of thorough affliction, includes:

- 1) A consideration of the way things are
- 2) A consideration of the way things appear
- 3) How to apply these principles

# ONE

## THE CHARACTERISTICS

### THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THOROUGH AFFLICTION

#### THE WAY THINGS ARE

On the first topic, the treatise states:

The false imagination exists.  
In it, the two do not exist.  
Emptiness exists here,  
And within it, that exists as well. [I.1]

Not empty, not not empty—  
This explains it all,  
Because of existence, non-existence, and existence.  
This is the path of the Middle Way. [I.2]

The explanation begins with the characteristics. **The false imagination**, the conception of apprehended and apprehender, **exists**. **In it, the two**, apprehended and apprehender, **do not exist**. The **emptiness** of apprehended and apprehender **exists here** in the false imagination, **and within it** (the emptiness), **that** (the false imagination) **exists as well**. Thus, in exact accordance with reality, it can be seen that when something is absent within something else, then the latter is empty of the former.

Emptiness and the false imagination are **not empty**, yet they are **not not empty** of apprehended and apprehender either. **This explains**

it **all**, both the conditioned, which is referred to as the “false imagination,” and the unconditioned, which is referred to as “empty.” **Because of the existence** of the false imagination, the **non-existence** of apprehended and apprehender, **and the existence** of emptiness, there is nothing that is unequivocally either empty or not empty. **This is the path of the Middle Way.** Thus, these verses accord with statements from the *Transcendent Knowledge* and other sources, such as: “All of this is neither empty, nor not empty.”

It is said that the false imagination alone is the basis for all the appearances that occur within the context of this seemingly impure cyclic existence, and that it exists substantially. Thus, the appearances of cyclic existence undeniably arise; nobody can negate their mere appearance. But they arise through the power of our own imagination and do not have the least bit of establishment apart from that. Therefore, because conventions should not be denigrated, cyclic existence itself is held to exist by the power of the imagination. This is also referred to as the “impure dependent nature.”

The apprehended and apprehender that appear to the imagination, the dependent consciousness, are not established, nor do they exist the way they appear. Like the perspective of high and low in a painting or a cairn that appears to be a person, they are purely imaginary and have no essence of their own. Therefore, that emptiness, the absence of apprehended and apprehender, is thoroughly established. It exists here, in the imagination, the dependent consciousness, as its intrinsic nature.

Within that emptiness, the imagination exists as well as that which possesses the property of emptiness. Just like fire and its heat, the imagination and emptiness cannot be separated, as they are phenomena and the nature of phenomena. This is so even when there is no realization. Once realization has occurred, they arise as the wakefulness that exclusively sees the nature of things. Therefore, the imagination is not exclusively empty. Its existence is substantial or, in other words, not deceptive at [the level of] convention. However, although it exists, the apprehended and apprehender do not exist as they appear. Therefore, neither is it not empty.

It is with this intent that sūtras, such as those of the *Transcendent Knowledge*, state: “All of this is neither empty, nor not empty.” In this way, such teachings explicitly refute all extremes; their explanation is not one-sided. Moreover, as Vasubandhu says in his commentary:



Thus, in exact accordance with reality, it can be seen that when something is absent within something else, then the latter is empty of the former. That which remains present is, then, in exact accordance with reality, fully understood to exist there. This shows the characteristic of emptiness without error.

Accordingly, in the context of a discerning knowledge that properly distinguishes existence from non-existence, we may explain the following. When a rope is mistaken for a snake, the rope itself is empty of any actual snake. Likewise, the false imagination, i.e., the dualistic appearance of apprehended and apprehender, itself exists, despite the real non-existence of such duality. That which does not exist is the duality of apprehended and apprehender. Though that is how it appears to be, no such duality has ever been present. Thus, the imagination should be understood to be empty of the duality of apprehended and apprehender. Even though there is no snake, the rope itself exists conventionally and the very absence of snake is present in the rope. Likewise, that which remains present is the conventional imagination, as well as the thoroughly established emptiness that exists as its intrinsic nature.

These two must be asserted and accepted to be existent. If one asserts the non-existence of the imagination, cyclic existence will become absolutely non-existent and one will incur the fault of denigrating conventions. If one refutes emptiness, failing to comprehend that it exists in terms of its being established in relation to that subject, the imagination, then the apprehended and apprehender will end up being existent and one will incur the fault of exaggerating their status as ultimate. Therefore, one must know how to assert unequivocally what is to be negated and what should be established conventionally. Otherwise, one will fail to do so and end up asserting the opposite [of what is actually the case].<sup>27</sup>

When the false imagination, the mere awareness of dualistic appearances, occurs within cyclic existence, these directly perceived appearances exist in an undeceiving way from the perspective of that which experiences them. However, the apparent separation between the apprehended and apprehender is not actually present. And yet that emptiness, the absence of apprehended and apprehender, *is* present in the subject, the false imagination, as its intrinsic nature. Hence, this is ascertained to be the nature of appearance that lacks essential establishment, the unity of appearance and emptiness. This type of realization transcends the extremes of super-

imposed existence and non-existence—it is the path of the Middle Way. As such, it is the perfect realization of the intrinsic nature of entities.

### THE WAY THINGS APPEAR

On the second topic, the treatise states:

Appearing as objects, sentient beings, the self  
And awareness, consciousness arises.  
Its objects do not exist.  
Therefore, it does not exist either. [I.3]

Thus, the false imagination is established.  
This is not how it is,  
Yet it is not absolutely nothing either.  
Liberation is held to follow its exhaustion. [I.4]

Having thus demonstrated the characteristics of existence and non-existence, the specific characteristics of the false imagination are now set forth. **Appearing as objects**, such as form, as **sentient beings**, i.e., the five faculties in one's own and others' stream of being, as **the self**, the defiled mental cognition associated with the delusion of self and so on, and as **awareness**, the six consciousnesses, **consciousness arises**. **Its objects**, the appearances of objects and sentient beings, **do not exist**. **Therefore**, since the appearances of self and awareness are mistaken appearances, **it**, the apprehender, **does not exist either**.

**Thus, the false imagination is established** because it does appear in this way. Nevertheless, because it is just the arising of delusion, **this is not how it really is**, and **yet it is not absolutely nothing either**. The reason that it is not held to be exclusively and absolutely non-existent is because **liberation is held to follow its exhaustion**. Holding otherwise, one would incur the fault of denigrating thorough affliction and complete purification.

What is the false imagination? It is the all-ground consciousness, which itself appears as the diversity of phenomena. It appears as external objects, such as form and so forth, as sentient beings endowed with faculties, such as that of the eye and so on, as the self, which refers to the defiled mental cognition, and as awareness, the six collections. Consciousness

arises due to the power of the imagination's habitual tendencies and the apprehended and apprehender appear as diverse features like the appearances in a dream.

However, when these appearances are properly investigated, the objects apprehended by the six collections of consciousness are seen to be unestablished. The same water can be seen in different ways—hungry ghosts, for example, will see it as pus, while humans will take it to be water. Similarly, the “lack of establishment of external objects” is explained to imply that it is one's own mind that appears as objects, that objects do not exist at all apart from that which apprehends them. That being so, since the apprehended does not exist, the apprehender that is posited based on it does not exist either, because these two are not established separately but in mutual dependence. In this way, although the experience of apprehended and apprehender exists, this duality has no establishment.

This is what is meant when it is said that the false imagination is substantially established, that it substantially exists. If this dualistic consciousness were something that never knew any existence, like the horns of a rabbit, it would be completely non-existent and no one would be able to assert its existence. On the other hand, if it were dualistically established in the same way it appears, it could not be posited to be a *false* imagination either. This being the case, it is called a “false imagination” because it does not exist as it appears, as the duality of apprehended and apprehender.

Although duality does not exist, the false imagination is not something absolutely non-existent either because the experience of duality exists. It is not something that nobody has ever experienced, like the son of a barren woman. Categorizing the false imagination as a substance or as the basis for the concepts that occur within cyclic existence is itself a faultless tenet. No one can object to it.

The exhaustion of this false imagination, this delusion, provides for the attainment of the intrinsic nature, an attainment characterized by the absence of apprehended and apprehender. This attainment is asserted to be “liberation” because that which we call “cyclic existence” is not anything at all apart from deluded conception. Therefore, as the false imagination itself exists conventionally in this way, thorough affliction and complete purification, bondage and liberation, are all sound principles. If it did not exist, they would all be untenable.

## HOW TO APPLY THESE PRINCIPLES

The third topic includes (1) a presentation of [the false imagination and emptiness] as the meaning of the three natures, and (2) how to access this meaning.

## THE THREE NATURES

On the first topic, the treatise states:

**This, also, is the imaginary, the dependent,  
And the thoroughly established,  
These are taught with reference to objects,  
The false imagination, and the absence of the two. [I.5]**

The characteristics of the summation—this summation being the three natures—is as follows: **This, also, is the imaginary, the dependent, and the thoroughly established. These are taught with reference to the apprehending of objects, the false imagination, and the absence of the two—the apprehended and apprehender.**

The imagination is presented using the principle of the three natures. These three are the imaginary, the dependent, and the thoroughly established. To elaborate, there seem to be external objects and there is a presence of dualistic experience. In this way, there seem to be objects, while [in fact] there are none. It is with regard to this that the imaginary, or delusion, is posited. These appearances are nothing other than the false imagination. Therefore, considering the basis for these appearances, the imagination's own essence is posited as the dependent consciousness. Finally, the duality of apprehended and apprehender is primordially devoid of actual establishment. Therefore, the nature of the [imagination] is explained to be the very essence of non-duality, which is thoroughly established.

## HOW TO ACCESS THIS MEANING

On the second topic, the treatise states:

Based on observation,  
 Non-observation takes place.  
 Based on non-observation,  
 Non-observation occurs. [I.6]

Therefore, observation is established  
 As the very nature of non-observation.  
 Thus, observation and non-observation  
 Must be understood to be equal. [I.7]

The characteristics of the method that allows one to access the characteristics of the non-existence of the false imagination are as follows: **Based on the observation** of mere awareness, the **non-observation** of external objects **takes place**. **Based on the non-observation** of an apprehended object, the **non-observation** of any apprehending subject also **occurs**. **Therefore**, since there are no objects to be observed, the mind associated with **observation is established as the very nature of non-observation**, for when there are no objects to be observed there cannot be any observer. **Thus**, because what appears to be an object is [in fact] the very nature of non-observation, **observation and non-observation must be understood to be equal**.

The way to approach the nature of this false imagination, which is comprised of the three natures, is as follows. The very appearance of objects can be understood and observed to be the ripening of inner habitual tendencies. By familiarizing oneself with this understanding, one will realize that substantial external objects cannot be observed. In the same way, in not observing external objects, the apprehender itself will not be observed either. Therefore, when it is understood that external objects are not established, their identity can be seen to be that of the inner mind, as is the case with the objects in a dream. They are not observed or established as external objects, but as the very essence of consciousness. Thus, it should be understood that [certain affirmations, such as] “the observation that all appearances have the nature of mere imagination” and “the observation [that all appearances] are the essence of mere awareness,” and [negations, such as] “the non-observation of external objects,” are equal or similar in meaning. Although observation and non-observation are demonstrated from the perspective of affirmation and negation respectively, they are making the same key point.

## HOW AFFLICTION OCCURS

The second topic, how affliction occurs, includes demonstrations of (1) what causes affliction, and (2) how affliction occurs.

### THE CAUSE OF AFFLICTION

On the first topic, the treatise states:

The false imagination is the mind  
And mental states that comprise the three realms:  
The consciousness that sees an object and  
The mental states that see its distinct features. [I.8]

The first is the conditional consciousness.  
The second involves an encounter—  
Encounter, determination  
And the mental states that cause this to engage. [I.9]

With respect to the characteristics of its divisions, **the false imagination is the mind and mental states that comprise the three realms**. The first of these classifications, **consciousness**, is characterized by being **that** which merely **sees an object**, and the second, **mental states** such as sensation, are **that** which sees its (the object's) **distinct features**.

Of the factors that characterize engagement, **the first** is the all-ground consciousness. In being the condition for the other consciousnesses, the all-ground consciousness **is the conditional consciousness**. **The second** consists of the engaging consciousnesses and **involves an encounter** with form and the rest of the six objects. This includes **encounter**, or sensation, **determination**, or identification, **and the mental states that cause this consciousness to engage**, which are the formations, including factors such as volition and direction.

There is no creator of the afflictions that occur within the three realms of cyclic existence aside from one's own imagination. What, then, is this "false imagination"? It is the dualistic appearance of apprehended and apprehender, all of the minds and mental states that comprise the three realms. This explanation shows that the undefiled mind is not included in the false imagination.

What is the difference between the primary mind and its associated mental states? The factor that observes the mere essence of an object is called “primary mind” or “consciousness,” whereas the particular way of apprehending in which one observes the distinct features of an object is referred to as a “mental state.”

The primary mind, or consciousness, can be divided into eight collections of consciousness. Of these, the all-ground consciousness alone is known as the causal or conditional consciousness because it is the basis for the other seven collections. The second factor consists of the seven collections that arise from the all-ground consciousness and experience their individual objects. The divisions of mental states are as follows. Sensation is the experience of an object as either pleasurable, painful, or neutral. Identification is to apprehend an object by determining its marks. All of the associated formations that are mental states other than those in the preceding two categories, such as volition and interest, have the function of causing the essence of that consciousness to engage its object.<sup>28</sup> The mind, for example, is classified as a mental state of volition from the perspective of its moving towards and engaging an object, whereas from the perspective of its remaining still, it is posited to be an absorption. In this way, mental states are grouped into the three aggregates of sensation, identification, and formation.

## HOW AFFLICTION OCCURS

On the second topic, the treatise states:

Due to obscuration and to planting;  
 Due to being led and to seizing;  
 Due to completion and to determination due to the three;  
 Due to encounter and to cohesion; [I.10]

Due to being bound, due to the actual,  
 And due to suffering—wandering beings are afflicted due to  
 these.  
 Three and two are affliction.  
 The seven come from the false imagination. [I.11]

The characteristics of thorough affliction are as follows. **Due to the obscuration** of ignorance that hinders seeing reality as it truly is **and**

due **to** the formations **planting** seeds in one's consciousness that ripen the karmic habitual tendencies; **due to being led** by consciousness to a birthplace **and** **due to seizing** a body through name and form; **due to** the physical state being brought to **completion** by the six sense sources **and** **due to the determination** that occurs **due to the three**—the object, faculty and cognition—coming into contact with one another; **due to** the **encounter** that takes place when things are sensed to have either an enjoyable or a painful nature **and** **due to** the **cohesion** that arises as a result of the craving that sustains the consciousness impelled by karma; **due to** consciousness **being bound** by grasping to desire and other factors that are conducive to rebirth, **due to** becoming bringing about **the actual** acquisition of a future existence **and** **due to** the **suffering** of birth, old age, and death—**wandering beings are afflicted due to these.**

Ignorance, craving, and grasping are afflictive thorough afflictions, while formation and becoming are karmic thorough afflictions. The remaining links constitute the thorough affliction of birth. Thus, there are **three** [types of thorough affliction with respect to the links] **and** there are **two** further divisions that **are** also **afflictions**: causal thorough affliction and resultant thorough affliction. Of these two, causal thorough affliction includes the afflictive and karmic thorough afflictions, while resultant thorough affliction includes the remaining links. “**The seven**” refers to seven causes: (1) ignorance is the cause of error; (2) formations are the cause of implantation; (3) consciousness is the cause of being led; (4) name and form and the six sources are the cause of seizing; (5) contact and sensation are the cause of encounter; (6) craving, grasping, and becoming are the cause of cohesion; and (7) birth, old age, and death are the cause of sadness. All of these thorough afflictions **come from the false imagination.**

There are nine characteristics that summarize the nature of the false imagination: (1) the characteristic of existence, (2) the characteristic of non-existence, (3) the specific characteristic, (4) the characteristic of the summation, (5) the characteristic of the method for accessing the characteristic of non-existence, (6) the characteristic of division, (7) the characteristic of the categorization, (8) the characteristic of engagement, and (9) the characteristic of thorough affliction.

How does the imagination cause one to continue through cyclic existence and develop afflictions? The answer is that cyclic existence continues



to evolve through the power of the unbroken relationship of the twelve links of dependent origination. What are these twelve? They are (1) *ignorance*, which afflicts wandering beings by keeping them from seeing true reality. In obscuring the perception of true reality, ignorance also functions as the source for the subsequent links, such as karmic formation, by grasping as if there were an “I” and “mine.” (2) *Formation* afflicts wandering beings by implanting the seeds of subsequent existence in the consciousness. In this way, when the root text states: “Wandering beings are afflicted due to...,” it should be understood to apply to all the remaining links as well, from consciousness on. Accordingly, (3) *consciousness* becomes infused with habitual tendencies and leads sentient beings to the place of their birth. (4) *Name and form* take hold of the body of one’s coming existence. (5) *The six sense sources* bring the state of name and form to completion. (6) *Contact* determines the experience of an object based on the coming together of three factors: object, faculty, and cognition. (7) *Sensation* experiences the various types of enjoyable and painful karmic ripening. (8) *Craving* creates the cohesion necessary for a future existence. (9) *Grasping* totally binds one to such an existence. (10) *Becoming* brings about the actual acquisition of this birth. (11) *Birth* serves as the support for the suffering of old age and so on. (12) *Aging and death* is the essence of suffering.

In this way, wandering beings are afflicted because the twelve links of dependent origination arise in succession, the former giving rise to the latter in an unbroken continuity. Whenever defiling karma and affliction cause birth to take place, it entails changes in the psychophysical continuum (aging) and its cessation (death). By extension, nothing occurs but sorrow, lamentation, and so forth—this great mass of suffering.

By their very essence, the defiled aggregates entail suffering in each and every moment. The superficial appearance of pleasure is transitory and both pleasure and pain eventually become the cause of suffering. Thus, the aggregates relate to the three kinds of suffering: the suffering of suffering, the suffering of change, and the all-pervasive suffering of conditioning. In this way, they are the basis for suffering.

The twelve links of dependent origination can be combined into three categories. Ignorance, craving, and grasping are called “afflictive thorough afflictions,” formation and becoming are called “karmic thorough afflictions,” while consciousness and the rest of the remaining seven form the basis for suffering and are called “thorough afflictions of birth” or “of life.” Furthermore, the term “thorough affliction” is used because all of these

are rooted in the false imagination and repeatedly afflict sentient beings, binding them to cyclic existence.

## THE CHARACTERISTICS OF COMPLETE PURIFICATION

The second topic, the characteristics of complete purification, contains two sub-divisions: (1) a brief presentation, and (2) a detailed explanation.

### BRIEF PRESENTATION

On the first division, the treatise states:

In short, emptiness can be understood  
By its characteristics and synonyms,  
By the meanings of these synonyms,  
And by its divisions and rationale. [I.12]

This passage shows how emptiness is to be understood. **In short, emptiness can be understood** by way of five topics: **by its characteristics and synonyms; by the meanings of these synonyms, and by its divisions and rationale.**

Emptiness is the basis for complete purification. It is free of cyclic existence, both in its causal form of karma and affliction and its resultant form of suffering. When summarized, this topic can be grouped into five categories: (1) the characteristics of emptiness, (2) its synonyms, (3) the meaning of these synonyms, (4) the divisions of emptiness, and (5) the rationale for positing it as either stained or stainless. Thus, it should be understood that the nature of emptiness can be ascertained via these five topics.

### DETAILED EXPLANATION

The second division contains a detailed explanation. This section includes five headings linked with the sequence explained above.