Introduction to Emptiness

AS TAUGHT IN TSONG-KHA-PA'S

Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path

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9. Who Am I, Really?*

A Puzzle

Near the outset of her adventures in Wonderland, Alice asks, "I wonder if I've been changed in the night? Let me think: *was* I the same when I got up this morning? I almost think I can remember feeling a little different. But if I'm not the same, the next question is 'Who in the world am I?' Ah, *that's* the great puzzle!"[7] Alice then ponders whether she has been changed into her friend Ada, or else perhaps has had the misfortune to become her friend Mabel. For if she has been changed, she has indeed become someone else—and it might well be someone she knows!

Those who love and raise children experience the poignancy of their rapid transformation from baby to toddler, young child, adolescent, and then adult. Is the baby I rocked on my chest the same person as this young man? Or is this a different person? We may notice the same problem, and perhaps a similar poignancy, when we look at old photographs. Am I the same person as, or a different person from, the nine-year-old Guy in the photograph? It feels hard to give either answer.

If we are pressed to stay focused on this question and to give an answer, we quickly begin to get uncomfortable. Is it the same person or a different person? Our discomfort may cause us to change the subject, dismissing the teacher or the book that is pressing us

* Based mainly on the *Great Treatise*, Volume 3, Chapters 21 and 22.

to work out the "great puzzle" of who we are. Our discomfort is based on a profound dissonance between how things really are—flowing, ungraspable, intermingling—and how we usually think and talk about them—as discrete and autonomous concrete units. Meditating on emptiness means committing yourself to going deeper and deeper into that dissonance so that it intensifies and becomes almost unbearable—as though there were a small child screaming in your ear demanding to know: *Who* are you? How *do* things exist?[8]

Intrusive Elephants and Married Bachelors

Let's begin by summarizing the steps in meditative analysis. First, we must identify in introspective meditation our own conception of intrinsic nature. This false self is like a demon that has caused us infinite torment. We can lure the demon out into the light by imagining situations of righteous indignation, in which one has been falsely accused, and then watching like a spy from a corner of the mind, trying to observe just what one's sense of self is like at that time. Without some exercise like this, it is tough to catch ourselves in the act of self-reification. The point is that we must notice within our own experience the ignorance that is the root of our cyclic existence, our own misconception of ourselves as having intrinsic nature.

Then, we have to set before ourselves a limited but *comprehensive* set of alternatives for how such a nature might exist if it did, in fact, exist. As an analogy, suppose someone were suffering from the delusion that there was an elephant in the house. We could make a comprehensive list of all the rooms in the house, or perhaps a list of all the spaces in the house that might in any way be large enough to contain an elephant. Then we could ask the deluded person to set it very firmly in mind that, were there an elephant in the house, it would absolutely have to be in one of those rooms. If he had some doubt, then we could add more places to the list, even if they seemed logically unnecessary, until he was able to feel

decisively confident that any elephant located in the house would *have* to be in one of those places.

Then, when a search of each room turned up no elephant, the force of his sense that, "There is simply nowhere else for an elephant to be" would be converted into the realization that, quite contrary to his delusion, there is no elephant in the house at all.

The case of the married bachelor is another analogy that, while superficially strange, gives us a picture of the analytical process as a whole. Suppose there is a person who is causing herself and others needless suffering, and suppose that at the back of these problems is her misconception that she will be happy only when she finds a married bachelor. We help her first to recognize that she has this misconception—to notice how this strange idea appears within her own mind. Then we consider the alternatives: the married bachelor must be either wed or unwed. When she has a strong sense of conviction that these two choices exhaust all possibilities, we can then rule out each of the alternatives through what appears to *us* to be ridiculously obvious analysis: he cannot be wed because he is a bachelor; he cannot be unwed because he is married. For someone who has been in the thrall of a harmful delusion, it is vital to work through each step carefully. This should allow her to see, with certainty, that she was grasping after something that is not there and never could exist at all.

While strange, this analogy has advantages over the elephant in the house. The analogy of the married bachelor illustrates how the process of analyzing intrinsic nature is a case of logically limiting alternatives and refuting each one. It is not a physical searching, as with the elephant. Moreover, while unlikely, it really is possible for there to be an elephant in the house; the married bachelor is impossible. It happens to be the case that there are no elephants in my house right now, and it may happen to be the case that unicorns have never existed anywhere. But—like the married bachelor—persons who exist in and of themselves, by way of their own essential natures, simply *cannot* exist, now or ever.

Analyzing a Chariot

Madhyamaka treatises include many different arguments refuting any essentialist view. In the *Great Treatise*, Tsong-kha-pa describes the process of meditative analysis of the intrinsic self of the person mainly in terms of one particular argument known as the lack of sameness and difference (*gcig du bral*). He first exemplifies how this argument works by analyzing a chariot and then applies the same argument to the person.

Tsong-kha-pa's explanation of the "lack of sameness and difference" begins by describing what has been known as the law of the excluded middle. It has sometimes been said, quite erroneously, that this principle is absent in non-Western logics. Sometimes we still encounter the perspective that Asian religions, or Buddhism in particular, are about mystical experience to the exclusion of rational analysis. Let's consider one of Tsong-kha-pa's statements of the excluded middle in the *Great Treatise*:[9]

> In the general case, we see in the world that when a phenomenon is mentally classified as accompanied, it is precluded from being unaccompanied, and when it is classified as unaccompanied, it is precluded from being accompanied. In general, therefore, same and different, as well as singular and plural, preclude any further alternative because the unaccompanied and the accompanied are [respectively] singular and plural.

In other words, accompanied and unaccompanied, like wed and unwed, are X and not-X. What is unaccompanied is alone, singular, and identical to itself. It is not diverse because it is one thing. What is accompanied is plural and diverse. So the basic principle that anything that exists must be either X or not-X entails that anything that exists must be either singular or plural, and must be either self-identical or diverse.

Tsong-kha-pa then uses this principle to limit the alternatives in the analysis of intrinsic nature:

> When you determine in the general case [that anything must be either] one or not one, then you will also determine that for the particular case [of something that exists essentially, it must be either] essentially one or essentially different.

So if a chariot, for example, had an essential or intrinsic nature, such would have to be demonstrated by rigorous analysis of whether it is identical to its parts or intrinsically different from them.

Is the chariot the same as its parts? No, for if it were, then just as the parts of a chariot are several and diverse, so the chariot too would be plural; or else, just as there is a single chariot there would only be one part. If the chariot were identical to its parts, then, since we say that a chariot *has* parts, the possessing agent would be identical to the possessed object. If agent and object could be identical in this way, then fire and fuel could just as well be identical. Simply putting a log (the burned object) in a cold fireplace should warm up the room because the burned object is the same as the burning agent, fire.

On the other hand, a chariot is not essentially separate from its parts because if it were, we would see cases of chariots appearing without any chariot parts, just as horses and cows can appear separately insofar as they are separate.

Since a chariot can be found neither among its parts nor essentially separate from them, it must lack an essential nature. This is because if there were an essentially existent chariot, it would have to be findable under this sort of analysis. The knowledge that things lack essential reality is a liberating insight into emptiness, the absence of intrinsic existence.

Another important point to note is that for Tsong-kha-pa the final basis for any argument, including this refutation of essential reality, is information provided by ordinary conventional

consciousness. We see that a log is different from a flame, that a horse is different from a cow, that being accompanied is different from being unaccompanied. It is from this ordinary factual knowledge that we can develop arguments against essential nature. Our ordinary conventional consciousnesses are mistaken in that a log appears to them as though it were essentially real, but at the same time these conventional consciousnesses provide accurate and practical information. Not only can we use this information to light a fire—or select a car—but we also definitely need this information in order to form the argument against essential nature. As Tsong-kha-pa says, "Even when you analyze reality, the final basis for any critique derives from unimpaired conventional consciousnesses."

The Person

Tsong-kha-pa uses the same "absence of sameness and difference" argument to demonstrate that the self, or person, does not essentially exist because it is neither essentially one with nor essentially different from the mental and physical aggregates. He explains that the practitioner, having first identified the object of negation—the conception of an intrinsic self—in her own experience, then asks herself whether this essential self is the *same* as her mind and body or *different* from her mind and body.

The notion that the essential self is the same as the mind and body is contradicted by many arguments. Let's consider four of these: (1) it would be redundant even to speak of a self; (2) there would be many selves, or else only one aggregate; (3) the intrinsically existing self would be impermanent, arising and disintegrating; (4) any agent and its object could be identical.

If there were an essentially existing self that was exactly identical to the elements and aspects of the mind and body, then these aggregates would *be* that self. There would be no need to talk about it, conceive of it, or argue about it. The self would be simply and exactly a synonym for the mind/body complex. Yet in speech,

reflecting our way of thinking, the self of a person seems very distinct from the person's mind and body. We use expressions like "my mind," "my body," "my hand," or "my feelings," or even "my life." How can the "me" that we think of as possessing these various and changing feelings be precisely the feelings themselves? Therefore, the essentially existent self cannot be identical to the mind and body.

The second argument is that if the aggregates of the mind and body were exactly identical to the essential self, then they would have to have all of the same qualities and attributes. For example, they would have to be numerically the same. Just as a person is conceived to have only *one* essential self, the aggregates of mind and body would then also have to be only one in number—whereas in fact, there are obviously many diverse parts of the mind and body. Or else, since these components are diverse, there would have to be many diverse essentially existing selves for each person. I would have ten "toe selves," and so forth. Yet this is not at all how it appears to us when we introspectively observe our sense of a "real self." This real self seems to be the singular essence and autonomous core of my being as a person. It is therefore contradictory to say that it is identical to the plural and diverse elements of mind and body.

The third argument is that if an intrinsically existing self were identical to the mind and body, then it would have to change moment by moment, just as the mind and body do. In that case, the intrinsically existing self of one moment would be different from the intrinsically existing self of a later moment. A consequence, then, of identifying the intrinsically existent self with the mind/body complex is that we would have to acknowledge that the essential self is different in each moment, as the body and mind change. But if the "me" of past moments is a different essence from the "me" of the present moment, then how can I remember things that the earlier person experienced? My former self was different *in essence*; it is essentially different from the "me" of this moment. And if persons who are essentially different can remember each

other's experiences, then anyone in the world should be able to remember the experiences of any other person. Yet this does not occur.

A fourth argument is that if the intrinsic self were identical to the mind and body, then, since we say that a person *has* a body and *has* a mind, the possessing agent would be identical to the possessed object. If an agent and object could be identical in this way, then fire and fuel could just as easily be identical. As noted above, this would imply that putting a log in a cold fireplace should warm up the room, or that one could use a knife to cut itself.

But why should we not, then, consider that the intrinsically existing self is *different* from the mind and body? If the person had an essential character that was different from the essential character of the mental and physical aggregates, then my "self" could be found and identified quite apart from my mind and body. That is, just as horses and cows have different qualities and can be seen in different places, we should be able to point out my essential self in one place and time while my mind and body were somewhere else altogether.

In fact, we use the term "person" in reference to a continuum of changing mental and physical factors. The person, each of the individual factors of mind and body, and the whole continuum of ever-changing factors are all devoid of any essential or intrinsic nature. Because I have no essence, I am neither essentially the same as nor essentially different from Guy at age nine. I am also neither essentially the same as nor essentially different from persons with different mind-streams, such as George Bush. But unlike George Bush, I am in the same personal continuum with the Guy of yesterday and the Guy I was as a child. My experiences and choices at those times left imprints, like the footprints left behind by a bird that has now flown away. I inherit the effects of my own past actions. The choices we make create ripples, and from these our distinct but ever-changing set of inclinations and moral qualities roll down like a wave through the stream of our minds. So, conventionally, it is correct to say, "This is a picture of me when I

was nine," and "That is not a picture of me; it is a picture of George Bush."

Tsong-kha-pa notes that non-Buddhist philosophies about an eternal and essential self arise when their proponents realize that the essential self really cannot be identical to the flux of mental and physical aggregates. Reaching the wrong inference, they then teach about the existence of a metaphysical self that is essentially different from the mind and body. However, their own ordinary and conventionally valid consciousnesses never perceive any essence or intrinsic self that is different from the mind and body. This is simply an imaginary construct. Instead of assuming that there *must* be a permanent self and then locating it as an essence distinct from the mind and body, they should realize that since an intrinsically existing self can be found neither as one with nor as different from the mind and body, it simply does not exist.

Since it is impossible for the person to be an essential self that is either one with or different from the aggregates, it is impossible for the person to have any essence. The person lacks any intrinsic nature. The person exists only nominally and conventionally, and yet is fully able to function as an agent on this basis. In order to make your understanding of this conclusion very solid, it is important to consider every way that suggests itself to your mind in which there might be an essential self lurking somewhere, slipping through the cracks. With careful and focused analysis, every possibility can be resolved into being a case of "same" or "different" and will then break down in light of fallacies such as those mentioned above.

In meditative practice, we cannot be content to work through one line of reasoning in an abbreviated form. We must use multiple lines of reasoning drawn from the treatises of Nagarjuna and other Madhyamikas, and we must feel ourselves being drawn deeply into the process of working through them again and again. Only in this way can we develop strong conviction that the intrinsic self to which we normally cling has never and could never exist at all.

Dependent Arising

The contradiction, the real case of the married bachelor, is that we cling to the illusion that things solidly exist in and of themselves, while at the same time we live in the midst of unrelenting evidence of how things are not only transient, but contingent upon other things as conditions. This is frighteningly similar to the delusion of the married bachelor in its implication that someone out there is both wed (related to another) and unwed (unrelated to another). Are things related to one another or not?

To us, it seems to be "common sense" that (1) things are real in and of themselves and (2) because they are real, they are able to be in relationships that connect them to other real things. I hear people articulate, and find within myself, thoughts that add up to this: If things were not *already real* before they hooked up with something else, then what would there be to hook together?

We are correct to intuit that there cannot be relationships without some related entities. Relationships do not exist apart from that which is related. However, we are profoundly wrong to believe that there must therefore be ultimately real things—unrelated and independent things—that just happen to be there on their own, and then later relate to one another.

Through meditating on how things are empty because they are dependent arisings, we retrain our minds to see that things exist *only* insofar as they are related to other things—none of which is ultimately real. Since nothing has its own way to set itself up, each and every thing is the expression of vast networks of relationships with and among other things. There is no bottom, no absolute ground of being, no unconditioned support or starting point. Everything emerges from the surging and relentless complexity of innumerable interdependent conditions, every one of which is analytically unlocatable.

Implicit in clichés such as "every snowflake is unique" is a celebration of our own uniqueness as living beings. The problem is only that we believe, usually unconsciously, that our uniqueness

arises from an inner essence that is our private core. To defend and aggrandize that core, we harm others; to nurture that core, we build up our greed. We act as though malicious anger were our protective father, and craving were our sustaining mother. No one can begin to measure how much pain and anguish this has caused.

In fact, our uniqueness arises from our distinctive, ever-shifting, and infinite array of connections with other things. We are unique and important, but we do not *own* our uniqueness. We have no intrinsic core. We owe our uniqueness to all of our conditions—and to our emptiness. For without the open sky of emptiness, the rest of the world could not shine into and through us, and we could never be what we are—living beings making choices that matter.

Seeing Things as Like Illusions

How does the world appear to someone who has been doing this type of analysis in meditation? Tsong-kha-pa cites a poetic passage from the *King of Concentrations Sutra* teaching that all phenomena are like mirages, illusions, reflections, echoes, and dreams. He explains that in the case of conventional phenomena such as persons or forms, this means that there is an appearance of X, but one simultaneously understands that there is no intrinsically existent X present at all. It is like the case of a reflection, for example, where there may be a vivid appearance of a face, but we understand that there is in fact no face present in what is appearing.

At the end of analysis, when one emerges from meditation on emptiness, one discerns again the appearance of tables and chairs and persons. However, having just analyzed the emptiness of these things, they appear in a very different light. They seem illusion-like, perhaps vague, indistinct, or shimmering.

However, having an altered state of consciousness after meditation does not necessarily indicate that one has accurately realized how things are like illusions. As Tsong-kha-pa says, "That sort of experience comes to everyone who aspires to Madhyamaka tenets

and hears a little of the teaching that shows that things lack intrinsic nature." He suggests that you may have this kind of experience even after meditation in which you have negated too much:

> When your analysis of an object uses reason to obliterate it, you first think, "It is not there." Then as you come to see the analyzer [yourself] in the same way, there is no one even to ascertain that nonexistence. So, with no way to determine what something is or is not, it begins to seem that what appears has become vague and indistinct.

Truly understanding the illusoriness of the person requires both a complete and accurate refutation of the person's intrinsic nature and an understanding that it is precisely these persons without intrinsic nature who engage in actions and experience their effects. In other words, the empty and illusory person *exists* and makes choices, acting effectively to help or to harm.

If you misidentify the object of negation even slightly and negate too much, then as your understanding of this "emptiness" strengthens, you undermine your confidence in the practice of virtues such as generosity, ethical discipline, and patience. Truly finding the Madhyamaka view requires understanding emptiness accurately, which is to say, understanding it in such a manner as to preserve its complete compatibility with dependent arising. Truly knowing emptiness is not, then, an encounter with meaninglessness. It is precisely what allows us to see with full assurance that our actions matter, that what we do will make a difference by serving as a condition for what will happen in the future.

Reminding us that finding this perspective is a great challenge, Tsong-kha-pa gives clear guidance on how to proceed:

> Form a clear concept of the object that reason will be refuting. Then focus on how, if there were such an intrinsically existing person, it could only be one with or different

> from its aggregates, and how reason contradicts both of these positions. Develop certainty in seeing this critique. Finally, solidify your certainty that the person does not even slightly exist intrinsically. In the phase of meditating on emptiness, practice this often.
>
> Then, bring to mind the conventional person who is undeniably apparent. Turn your mind to dependent arising, wherein that person is posited as the accumulator of karma and experiencer of effects, and be certain about how dependent arising is possible without intrinsic existence. When they seem contradictory, think about how they are not contradictory, taking an example such as a reflection.

When it seems to us that the person's emptiness of intrinsic nature contradicts the person's ability to act and to experience the effects of action, then Tsong-kha-pa invites us to use a reflection or a similar analogy to develop confidence in the complete compatibility of these two things. He then lays out exactly how this analogy works:

> A reflection of a face is undeniably a conjunction of (1) being empty of the eyes, ears, and such that appear therein and (2) being produced in dependence upon a mirror and a face, while disintegrating when certain of these conditions are gone. Likewise, the person lacks even a particle of intrinsic nature, but is the accumulator of karma and the experiencer of effects, and is produced in dependence upon earlier karma and afflictions.

A person appears very vividly to have intrinsic nature, just as the reflection of a face may appear very vividly to be a face. If we come upon a reflection of ourselves unexpectedly, in a very clean mirror, we may for a moment be startled. We may feel strongly that we are seeing another person. While this appearance as a person is

completely false, the reflection does exist and does function effectively as what it actually is. It arises, functions, and passes away depending upon conditions.

Likewise, the person is completely devoid of any shred of the intrinsically existent nature that vividly appears to our minds. Such a nature is unfindable because of being utterly nonexistent, just as there is no actual person in the mirror. On the other hand, just as a reflection does exist as a mere reflection, a person does exist as a mere person. And, as it turns out, that is exactly the kind of person one needs to be in order to make choices, to act and to change, and to bring help to the world.

The *King of Concentrations Sutra* says:

> When reflections of the moon appear at night in clear, clean water, they are empty and ungraspable. Know that all phenomena are this way.
>
> A person tormented by thirst, traveling at midday in summer, sees mirages as pools of water. Know that all phenomena are this way.
>
> Although water does not exist in a mirage at all, a deluded being wants to drink it. Know that all phenomena are this way.

The Buddha is not a God issuing the great commandment: Do not grasp. Nor is he a judge who stands ready to condemn those who violate this commandment. Rather, the Buddha is our spiritual physician, giving us healthy advice. If happiness could be attained by grasping things, there would no need for Buddhism. All of our needless miseries arise because we continue to grasp after things that are in fact completely ungraspable—because they have no pith, no innermost core, no fixed essence.

What is true of chariots and persons is true of all things, and to the same degree. The Buddha points out the painful and sad futility of our clinging to objects, people, ideas, experiences, and identities that simply *cannot* be held, no matter how tightly they are

grasped. Because they have no ability to set themselves up and exist on their own, we and the things around us are in flux, changing as conditions change. With no essential nature, neither our own selves nor the things around us have any inner handle by which we can grab and hold them. We are afraid to face this lack, this emptiness. Our fear arises from and feeds our grasping, and in this way we build a prison for ourselves, moment by moment. Yet by bravely facing the reality of emptiness, we can let go of our fear, anger, and greed. We can be free.