

# Emptiness



THE FOUNDATION of  
BUDDHIST THOUGHT

VOLUME 5

GESHE TASHI TSERING

FOREWORD BY LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE

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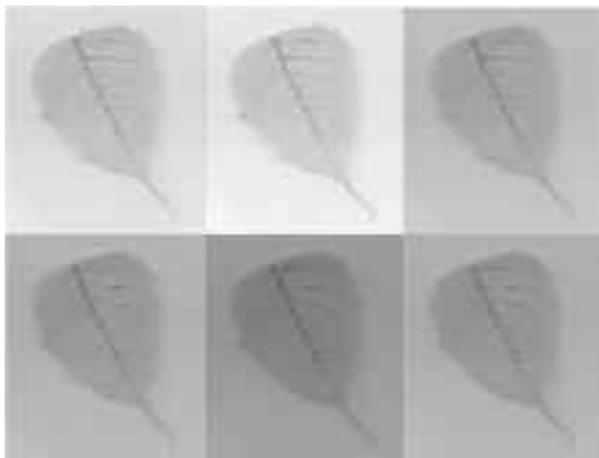
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# EMPTINESS

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EDITED BY GORDON MCDUGALL



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# CONTENTS

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Foreword	IX
Preface	XI
Editor's Preface	XV
<b>1. The Revolution of Selflessness</b>	<b>I</b>
THE UNIQUENESS OF THE BUDDHA'S CONCEPT OF NO-SELF	I
The Importance of Selflessness	3
SELFLESSNESS IN THE SUTRAS	5
Did the Buddha Invent Selflessness?	5
Understanding Reality as It Is	7
Selflessness in the Three Turnings of the Dharma Wheel	11
The Commentaries that Deal with Emptiness	14
<b>2. The Prerequisites for Developing an Understanding of Selflessness</b>	<b>19</b>
THE PERFECTION OF CONCENTRATION	19
CALM ABIDING	21
Cultivating Calm Abiding	22
The Best Object of Meditation	25
Mindfulness and Alertness	27

INSIGHT	30
How Insight Is Cultivated According to Tibetan Buddhism	32
<b>3. The Concepts of Selfhood</b>	<b>35</b>
ALL THINGS ARE NO-SELF	35
Right View Is Supramundane Insight	35
All Things Are No-Self	36
Was the Prasangika View of Selflessness Taught by the Buddha?	38
LEVELS OF SELFHOOD	39
The Two Types of Emptiness	39
Acquired and Innate Self-Grasping	41
The Self as an Unchanging, Unitary, and Autonomous Entity	43
The Self as a Self-Sufficient, Substantial Entity	46
The Self as an Intrinsic Entity	48
Identifying the Thief	50
SELFLESSNESS IN THE FOUR BUDDHIST SCHOOLS	52
Selflessness in the First Three Schools	52
Selflessness in Svatantrika Madhyamaka	55
<b>4. The Differences Between Svatantrika and Prasangika</b>	<b>61</b>
THE MAIN DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE SUBSCHOOLS OF MADHYAMAKA	61
The Difference in the Line of Reasoning	61
The Difference in Direct Perception	66
The Difference in Ultimate and Conventional Levels	69

The Difference in the Understanding of Dependent Origination	70
The Difference in Identifying the Two Obscurations	71
<b>5. Prasangika's Unique Presentation of Emptiness</b>	<b>77</b>
THE OBJECT OF NEGATION	77
Empty of What?	77
Refuting the Referent Object	81
The Object of Ultimate Analysis	82
What Is Intrinsic Nature?	85
Some Clarification of Innate Self-Grasping	88
<b>6. Establishing Emptiness</b>	<b>91</b>
LINES OF REASONING	91
The Seven-Point Analysis	93
1. <i>The Chariot Cannot Be Identical with Its Parts</i>	95
1a. <i>The Self Cannot Be Identical with the Aggregates</i>	95
2. <i>The Chariot Cannot Be Posited         as Something Separate from Its Parts</i>	96
2a. <i>The Self Cannot Be Posited             as Something Separate from the Aggregates</i>	97
3. <i>The Parts of the Chariot Do Not Exist Intrinsically         as the Base of the Chariot</i>	98
3a. <i>The Aggregates Do Not Exist Intrinsically as a Base of the Self</i>	98
4. <i>The Chariot Does Not Exist Intrinsically         Dependent on Its Parts</i>	98
4a. <i>The Self Does Not Exist Intrinsically             Dependent on the Aggregates</i>	99
5. <i>The Chariot Does Not Possess Its Parts</i>	99
5a. <i>The Self Does Not Possess the Aggregates             in the Sense of Some Kind of Inherent Possession</i>	99

6. <i>The Chariot Is Not Identical with the Collection of Its Parts</i>	100
6a. <i>The Collection of the Aggregates Cannot be Posited as the Self</i>	100
7. <i>The Chariot Is Not Its Shape</i>	100
7a. <i>The Shape or Configuration of the Aggregates Cannot be Posited as the Self</i>	101
Refuting the Four Possibilities of Production	102
The King of Reasons	105
HOW THE PERSON AND PHENOMENA APPEAR LIKE AN ILLUSION	107
<b>7. Emptiness and Dependent Arising</b>	<b>109</b>
THE THREE LEVELS OF DEPENDENT ARISING	109
The Impact of Dependent Arising	109
The Three Levels of Dependent Arising	110
<i>Causal Dependency</i>	111
<i>Mutual Dependency</i>	113
<i>Merely-Labeled Dependency</i>	116
Emptiness and Dependent Arising	118
The Merging of Emptiness and Dependent Arising	121
CONCLUSION	127
Appendix	131
Glossary	135
Bibliography	143
Notes	145
Index	149
About the Authors	157
The Foundation of Buddhist Thought	159

## FOREWORD

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THE BUDDHA'S MESSAGE is universal. We all search for happiness but somehow fail to find it because we are looking for it in the wrong way. Only when we start cherishing others will true happiness grow within us. And so the Buddha's essential teaching is one of compassion and ethics, combined with the wisdom that understands the nature of reality. The teachings of the Buddha contain everything needed to eliminate suffering and make life truly meaningful, and as such the teachings are not only relevant to today's world, but vital.

This is the message my precious teacher, Lama Thubten Yeshe, gave to his Western students. His vision to present the Dharma in a way that is accessible and relevant to everyone continues and grows. His organization, the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT), now has centers all over the world, and Lama's work is carried on by many of his students.

*The Foundation of Buddhist Thought*, developed by Geshe Tashi Tsering, is one of the core courses of the FPMT's integrated education program. The essence of Tibetan Buddhist philosophy can be found within its six subjects. *The Foundation of Buddhist Thought* serves as a wonderful basis for further study in Buddhism, as well as a tool to transform our everyday lives.

Geshe Tashi has been the resident teacher at Jamyang Buddhist Centre, London, since 1994. He has been very beneficial in guiding

the students there and in many other centers where he teaches. Besides his profound knowledge—he is a Lharampa Geshe, the highest educational qualification within our tradition—his excellent English and his deep understanding of his Western students means that he can present the Dharma in a way that is both accessible and relevant. His wisdom, compassion, and humor are combined with a genuine gift as a teacher. You will see within the six books of the *Foundation of Buddhist Thought* series the same combination of profound understanding and heart advice that can guide beginner and experienced Dharma practitioner alike on the spiritual path.

Whether you read this book out of curiosity or as part of your spiritual journey, I sincerely hope that you find it beneficial and that it shows you a way to open your heart and develop your wisdom.

Lama Zopa Rinpoche

Spiritual Director

The Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition

## PREFACE

---

IN THIS BOOK I have tried to explain how we can cultivate within ourselves the understanding of the ultimate reality of how things and events exist, based on my very limited understanding and experience of emptiness. The book itself offers no comprehensive guide to the most esoteric teachings on emptiness, but is rather aimed at the beginner who wishes to gain some small insight into this subject, a subject that is extremely important for anyone who takes the Buddhist path seriously.

At the very beginning of his teaching career the Buddha introduced the concept of emptiness. The path that leads to the cessation of suffering, the fourth noble truth, is in essence the eightfold noble path, and within this path is right view. Even though we can interpret right view in many different ways, inferring many levels of subtlety, within Mahayana Buddhism it is generally agreed that the most profound level of right view is the understanding of selflessness or emptiness. It is also agreed that, along with compassion, developing an insight into emptiness is vital for someone on the path to enlightenment.

Why is emptiness so crucial? We who are bound to unenlightened existence need to realize it in order to be free. Born of delusion and karma, we are caught up in an endless round of birth, aging, sickness, and death, and we are almost powerless to break this vicious cycle. The

root of that process is fundamental ignorance, and we will be forever chained to unenlightened existence until we uproot it. The opposite of this basic mis-reading of our experience is the wisdom that understands the nature of reality at the deepest level. The most fundamental mode of existence of all phenomena in the universe is that they are absent of the intrinsic reality that our ignorance instinctively ascribes to them. And only the wisdom realizing emptiness has the full ability to counteract that ignorance that keeps us trapped in cyclic existence. In this context, understanding emptiness is vital.

In *A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, the great Indian master Shantideva starts the chapter on wisdom with:

All of these practices were taught  
By the Mighty One for the sake of wisdom.  
Therefore, those who wish to pacify suffering  
Should generate this wisdom.<sup>1</sup>

This verse tells us how crucial it is to develop an understanding of emptiness. Therefore in this book I have tried to use whatever limited knowledge and experience I have of the subject to explain how to gain this perfection of wisdom.

This book is a companion to the second book of the *Foundation of Buddhist Thought* series, *Relative Truth, Ultimate Truth*. The two truths are those of conventional and ultimate reality, and although I talked about both, in that book I focused more on relative, conventional reality. I deliberately saved the discussion of ultimate truth for this book.

*Emptiness* also links with the fourth book of the series, *The Awakening Mind*. The awakening mind is bodhichitta, the mind that seeks enlightenment in order to free all beings. It is a mind that is filled with great compassion, and because of that, sees that we need enlightenment to best serve others. *That* needs a full realization of emptiness.

As the great Indian master Chandrakirti says, to achieve enlightenment we need the two wings of method and wisdom, like the two wings of a bird. *The Awakening Mind* deals with how to develop love, compassion, bodhichitta, and other vital minds such as patience, ethics, and so on—the method side of the practice. This book deals with the other “wing,” the wisdom of emptiness. Just as a bird can’t fly with only one wing, likewise, we who seek to awaken need both method and wisdom.

I feel quite embarrassed. So many great teachers have taught extensively on emptiness; so many great texts have been written about it. We have over two thousand years of wisdom showing us how to develop this most crucial mind, and I, with so little knowledge, am adding yet another book on the subject. And yet, somehow I feel this book might be beneficial. I feel there is a gap between the extremely simplistic explanations of emptiness that are available, and the extensive, profound, and difficult to comprehend texts of the great masters. I hope this book will help to fill that gap. My motivation is sincere, and I genuinely hope that what I have written here can help those of you who, like me, are at the beginning of your quest for some higher understanding of the nature of this universe we live in. I further hope that, from this beginning, you may continue and study the great texts, meditate on this most profound of all subjects, and in the future come to have some actual realization of emptiness. If that can happen, then this book has been very worthwhile.



## EDITOR'S PREFACE

---

EMPTINESS, selflessness, voidness, shunyata—there are many terms used when discussing the wisdom side of the Buddha's teaching. It is so subtle that it's all too easy to get lost in the esoteric arguments and forget just how relevant this subject is to us, especially in this time of crisis. Geshe Tashi is not using hyperbole when he says that the Buddha was being "truly revolutionary" when he proposed that phenomena had "no self."

Being absent of intrinsic reality seems like an odd characteristic to hang a whole world of suffering on, but the simple fact is we fail to see this as the cause of it all. We see things as objectively solid and uncaused, even though, were we to logically investigate it, of course they are not. From that, all attachment and aversion arise. Understanding emptiness is not, therefore, a philosopher's plaything, but a vital tool to overcome suffering.

It's not something that will happen immediately. In fact, for many of us there is a huge block to this understanding. Personally, every time I opened a book on emptiness I fell asleep within one page; every time I sat in front of a great master, it took five minutes. Guaranteed! But with perseverance I can now stay awake quite well. The next hurdle is to understand what is being said.

By perseverance something is absorbed. And by becoming convinced of the importance of understanding emptiness, the will to

overcome the obstacles will grow. Fortunately, we don't need a profound insight into emptiness to benefit. Just letting go of that sense of concrete reality really helps. Being softer about the consequences when something falls apart helps us so much. By applying ourselves to this subject, there will be profound changes within us, even if it might take some time for them to manifest.

I was reminded of the importance of developing an understanding of emptiness at a climate change meeting a short time ago. "The change is upon us" was the message, and those who suffer most will be those who cling to the old ways. With the onset of expensive fuel, the huge population increases, and the accelerating climate change, nobody can deny the need to accept change and work with it. And yet, without seeing how the sense of a concrete reality we instinctively ascribe to things is binding us to suffering and disappointment, it will be desperately difficult to watch as this life of gross consumption and comparative luxury disappears. For someone with a good understanding of emptiness, it might not be easy, but it will be infinitely easier.

And so, we need to know. And for that, we need skilled teachers who can offer us the gems of the great Buddhist masters in a way we can understand. I think, if you have read any of the other *Foundation of Buddhist Thought* books, you will agree with me that Geshe Tashi is such a person. He has not only a profound knowledge of the subject from his many years of study, but also the ability to render it in clear and accessible English. Moreover, he has a natural flair for delivering the Dharma in a way that is lively, inspiring, and very relevant.

Born in Purang, Tibet, in 1958, Geshe Tashi escaped to India with his parents one year later. He entered Sera Mey Monastic University at thirteen, and spent the next sixteen years working toward a geshe degree. He graduated with the highest possible degree of Lharampa Geshe.

After a year at the Highest Tantric College (Gyuto), Geshe-la began his teaching career in Kopan Monastery near Kathmandu, the principal monastery of the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT). Geshe Tashi then moved to the Gandhi Foundation College in Nagpur, and it was at that time that the FPMT's Spiritual Director, Lama Thubten Zopa Rinpoche, asked him to teach in the West. After two years at Nalanda Monastery in France, Geshe Tashi became the resident teacher at Jamyang Buddhist Centre in London in 1994.

Very early on in his teaching career at Jamyang, he observed that the passive, text-based learning usually associated with Tibetan Buddhist teachings in Western Dharma centers often failed to engage the students in a meaningful way. In an effort to provide an alternative to this traditional teaching approach while giving his students a solid overview of Buddhism, he devised a two-year, six-module study program that incorporated Western pedagogic methods. This book has grown out of the fifth course book of this study program, *The Foundation of Buddhist Thought*.

As with the other books in the series, many people have been involved with the development of this volume and I would like to thank them all. I would also like to offer my warmest thanks to Lama Zopa Rinpoche, the head of the FPMT and the inspiration for the group of study programs to which *The Foundation of Buddhist Thought* belongs.



# I THE REVOLUTION OF SELFLESSNESS

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## The Uniqueness of the Buddha's Concept of No-Self

TWO THOUSAND FIVE HUNDRED YEARS AGO, philosophy flourished in India, and the teaching of Gautama Buddha was just one of many. Buddhism as such did not yet exist, and the ideas of the Buddha were just one part of the potpourri of Indian thought.

In many ways the Buddha's teachings conformed to and developed from the existing orthodox lines of reasoning of Brahmanism, which would later develop into what we know as Hinduism, and the various religious movements that sprang up in relation to and reaction against Brahmanic orthodoxy, such as the Upanishadic, Jain, and Shramanic movements. In particular, the Buddha's teachings hold much in common with Jainism. Many concepts are shared by all the movements: the law of cause and effect (*karma*), cyclic existence (*samsara*), liberation (*moksha*), as well as the guidelines for developing ethics and concentration. If we study the non-Buddhist Indian texts on these subjects we would find very little difference in the essence of what they teach. The general Indian public felt, as it still does, that Buddhism was part of the whole mix.

There is one area, however, where the Buddha diverted drastically from the established thinking and was a true revolutionary. Even today to hold such a view is to be truly radical. That view is selflessness.

How we cycle through existence was all explained within the major texts of both Jainism and Brahmanism. Due to karma we are locked in this round of birth, aging, sickness, and death, until we can finally break free and attain *moksha* or liberation. The Buddha was teaching nothing new when he explained these subjects.

Just who it is that cycles in *samsara*, however, is another matter. All philosophies concern themselves with who we are. For the other Indian philosophies, this was *atman*, the soul or self, but the Buddha declared that the reality of the self was *anatman*, no-self. This concept of selflessness has been a key point of Buddhist philosophy since then, whether it is called *anatman*, no-self, selflessness, or emptiness. (In general, I will use the term *selflessness* in the early chapters, where we look at the sources of what Tibetan Buddhism takes as the definitive view, and move to *emptiness* when we reach the higher philosophical schools. The difference is a very fine one and need not concern us here.)

When all the other topics within Buddhism are taken from the point of view of selflessness, they take on a richness that makes them truly Buddhist. Karma, for a Buddhist, is subtly different from the idea of karma for a follower of Jainism or Brahmanism, and therefore Hinduism. Applying the principle of no-self gives us one more layer of meaning, one that might take us closer to actually achieving the liberation we seek.

Seeing this unique quality of the Buddha's teachings has inspired me on my spiritual journey. We should not think that Buddhism is superior to the other non-Buddhist philosophies, but nonetheless, if these teachings suit our disposition, they can make a profound difference to the way we view the world.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF SELFLESSNESS

All philosophies and religions are designed to help us overcome our problems. The techniques used in the ancient non-Buddhist Indian religions were very effective at this. They recognized how our afflictive minds arise out of the three principal sources of attachment, aversion, and ignorance, and set about finding ways of eliminating these poisons. The art of concentration, in particular, was cultivated in India. Hinduism offers a complete guide to developing a focused mind, and includes all those stages recognized by Buddhism as necessary to achieve complete concentration. Were we to achieve complete *shamatha*, as it is called, we would go a long way toward reducing and temporarily eliminating our attachment and aversion.

But notice the qualification here. By cultivating concentration, we would *almost* destroy our deep-seated attachment and aversion, but not quite. Until we have completely eliminated the very seeds of the attachment, aversion, and ignorance from our mindstreams, those seeds can reactivate at a later time and grow, leaving us back at square one. The Buddha saw how if we really want to be completely free from suffering and its causes, eliminating the manifest negative minds is not enough. No matter how effective concentration is in dealing with the grosser delusions, it does not have the ability to destroy the root. It is like a set of scales: the more concentration, the fewer delusions; the less concentration, the more delusions. As our concentration comes and goes, so do our delusions. But, in the long run, lacking insight into emptiness, the delusions will win.

We need to investigate this for ourselves. Hopefully, if we investigate deeply enough we will see that anyone who seeks the total elimination of all suffering and the causes of suffering must completely uproot these three poisons. This requires a full understanding of how things exist, which is emptiness.

We currently perceive things as having intrinsic existence, where in fact they lack it. We see a chair and that seems to be that. It exists in and of itself, completely independent of causes and other factors, completely separate from the world in which it exists and the mind that apprehends it. This fundamental misreading of the nature of things and events is the cause of our suffering, because by means of this ignorance we are likely to develop attachment and aversion. As long as there is the slightest sense that things—especially our own sense of “I”—exist independently and concretely, we will cling to that separateness. When something strengthens this sense of a real “I,” we develop attachment for it, and conversely, when something threatens it, we develop aversion to it. This is why a clear and deep understanding of emptiness is crucial if we are seriously seeking the complete elimination of all our suffering.

Therefore, we might ask whether Buddhism reaches a truth that the other Indian philosophies do not. In Brahmanism, it is taught that my karma is my own responsibility; the actions I did in the past determine what I experience now, and the actions I do now determine what I will experience in the future. In that, Brahmanism does not differ from Buddhism in its presentation of karma. The difference is that, according to Brahmanism, the “I”—the person creating the cause or experiencing the result—has a “Brahma nature.” This *atman* that we all possess is Brahma in nature. It is not as if Brahma controls everything and we are powerless, but this Brahma-essence is at our core, an eternal and unchanging thing that goes from life to life.

Buddhism rejects this *atman*. This sense of identity is nothing more than a label placed on the ever-changing collection of the body and mind. Without a deep understanding of both concepts—selflessness and karma—it might seem that there is a contradiction. In fact, those who believe in an *atman* argue that the whole concept of karma would break down without the presence of some essential personal charac-

teristic that continues through lifetimes. This has been a key sticking point in the debates between Buddhist and non-Buddhist scholars.

Most probably you are not a Brahmin philosopher. Debates between Brahmins and Buddhists might not seem exactly relevant to you and me here and now, but if we are honest and can glimpse a little of how we perceive ourselves, we'll probably see that there is something in that glimpse we call the "I," that we consider permanent and unchanging. Consciously or unconsciously, our worldview is formed by our environment, our culture, and possibly by our religion (or the echoes of the religion that still permeate our society). Whether it is Christianity, Judaism, Islam, or any other of the religious and secular philosophies that influence us, most of us live with a sense of self that is separate from our aggregates of body and mind. According to the assertions of Buddhism, this sense of an independent and permanent self is completely erroneous. These various concepts of self that we all live with are important to understand, and we will look at this in chapter 3.

## Selflessness in the Sutras

### DID THE BUDDHA INVENT SELFLESSNESS?

The Buddha and subsequent Buddhist masters have argued that without a realization of selflessness or emptiness it is impossible to completely overcome suffering and its origins. Selflessness is the vital tool to achieve ultimate happiness. Is selflessness therefore some sacred concept, introduced by the Buddha and made holy by veneration of its powers? Is it something to pay homage to because it is an invention of the Buddha for our liberation? The answer is no. Selflessness is nothing sacred, nothing new in the sense of being created by the Buddha or Buddhist masters. There are many references from the sutras

and shastras that assert that selflessness is a natural condition of any phenomenon. The sutra *Dasabhumikasutra* (*The Sutra on the Ten Grounds*) says:

O son of the lineage, the dharmadhatu, the nature of all phenomena is like this: Whether buddhas are born or not, whether they reveal the true nature of phenomena or not, the dharmadhatu, the reality of all phenomena, abides as it is in being the lack of true existence.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, the great Indian master Chandrakirti, in his *Commentary on the Middle Way* (*Madhyamakavatara*) says:

Whether Buddhas actually appear or do not appear,  
The emptiness of all things  
Is explained as the other entity.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, you will find many quotes from the great masters about the natural condition of selflessness, as this is a crucial point that needs to be addressed when we begin to explore emptiness. Maitreya's *Ornament of Clear Realization* (*Abhisamayalamkara*) and *Sublime Continuum of the Mahayana* (*Uttaratantra*) are also important references that clarify how emptiness is not a concept that the Buddha created, but a fact that he came to understand. What we perceive to be reality differs according to the different levels of understanding we gain, and so what the Buddha realized was not some new concept, but a new depth of understanding. He saw that we could not totally break free of our suffering until we, too, had come to that level of understanding. Selflessness or emptiness is reality, not a doctrinal belief created by the Buddha.

In his *Ornament of Clear Realization*, Maitreya says:

There is nothing to be taken away, there is nothing to be added  
on,  
Whoever is able to see it as it is will be liberated.<sup>4</sup>

This verse clearly states that when we reach the final mode of existence of things and events, there is nothing we need to add to or subtract from that reality; simply realizing selflessness as it is will liberate us from all suffering and pain. We don't need devotion, faith, or belief in the Buddha; we simply need to realize how things really exist. While this is nothing newly created by the Buddha, the depth of his understanding of reality is unique.

### UNDERSTANDING REALITY AS IT IS

Probably one of the most difficult things we can ever do is to “simply” understand reality as it is. We have countless mental imprints from this or previous lifetimes that habituate us to instinctively see the things and events of our world as existing truly and independently from their own sides. Because of that habituation, even though the final mode of existence of phenomena—their selflessness or emptiness—is there all the time, it is not that straightforward to understand.

To explore reality, we should use our most discerning wisdom, even though at this stage reality is so obscured that we must rely on what others say about it. That does not mean we should blindly accept the opinions of others, no matter how great they might be. The Buddha himself said this in a quote often cited by subsequent masters:

O bhikshus and wise men,  
Just as a goldsmith would test his gold  
By burning, cutting, and rubbing it,

So must you examine my words and accept them.  
But not merely out of reverence for me.<sup>5</sup>

Lama Tsongkhapa quotes this toward the beginning of his *Essence of True Eloquence* (Tib: *Drang-nges legs-bshad snying-po*) to explain how to approach the understanding of the final mode of being of phenomena. Just as a goldsmith wouldn't accept a lump of yellow metal as gold without doing a complete examination, at this stage of our journey we cannot discern the actual reality of how phenomena exist by our own logical reasoning alone. We need to depend on others, but the manner in which we go about this is crucial. We should rely on them not because they are famous, or charismatic, or even because they are the head of a religion, but only because we have made a thorough examination of their teachings. This is a very important point. To understand emptiness, we depend on people like the Buddha or other great masters, and we need to do that only after thorough examination. When we find that there is no fault or deception in what they teach, then we can follow their guidance.

The second step is to follow their line of argument through to its final conclusion until we ourselves can realize it fully with our own direct perception. In this context it is said in the Mahayana teachings that there are four reliances:

- ◆ reliance on the teachings and not the teacher
- ◆ reliance on the meaning and not on the words that express it
- ◆ reliance on the definitive meaning and not the provisional meaning
- ◆ reliance on the transcendent wisdom of deep experience and not on mere knowledge<sup>6</sup>

The first reliance, *to rely on the teachings rather than the teacher*, means to go beyond the teacher's fame or charisma and investigate the essence of what he or she is teaching. This is important. Quite often, many of us simply follow teachers because of their names or personalities, or because someone has recommended them. That is not the right way. The teaching is the important thing, not the external façade, the personality of the presenter.

The second reliance, *to rely on the meaning rather than the words that express it*, means we need to delve even deeper, and go beyond the style of the teachings. How it is expressed is not the essential thing, no matter how eloquently or poetically structured. The substance, the meaning, is what is important. Beyond the form is the content, and that is what we need to grasp, in order to understand what is there.

The third reliance is *to rely on the definitive rather than the provisional meaning*. This is so important. The Buddha taught according to the level of his students, and so the range of his teachings suit the range of dispositions of the people he taught. There are many different levels of the spiritual path and each level needs guidance. Some teachings are suitable for one level of the path, at that particular moment. When the practitioner moves to the next stage, the previous teaching may no longer be appropriate.

Therefore, many teachings of the Buddha should be interpreted depending on their circumstances. We need to look beyond the surface of their provisional meaning to the definitive meaning beneath. Discriminating between provisional and definitive becomes crucial when we are looking at the teachings on the final mode of existence of phenomena, which we will examine below.

Finally, *to rely on transcendent wisdom and not mere knowledge* means that eventually we need a direct perception of emptiness—here called transcendent wisdom—to overcome our suffering. Mere knowledge—our conceptual understanding—is vital at this stage of our

understanding, but, while it may help us overcome many of our delusions, the fact it is a conceptual mind will ultimately block us from totally destroying our most subtle delusions and experience liberation. For that we need a direct realization of emptiness.

Let's look now at the differences between *definitive* and *provisional* meanings of texts. To determine whether a text is definitive or provisional, sometimes we need to address specific aspects of the content of a text and sometimes the whole text. The *Teachings of Akshayamati Sutra* (*Akshayamatinirdeshasutra*) says:

What are the sutras of definitive meaning and what the sutras of provisional meaning? Those sutras that teach in order to establish conventional understanding are called provisional, and those sutras that teach in order to establish ultimate understanding are called definitive. Those sutras that teach by way of various words and letters are called provisional, and those sutras that teach the profound reality, which is difficult to understand and to know, are called definitive.<sup>7</sup>

As this sutra indicates, the teachings of provisional meaning are those that teach the conventional reality, such as impermanence, cause and effect, and so on. They are called “provisional meaning teachings” because, although teachings such as those on the impermanence of the body show a reality, that reality is still not the final mode of being; there is a further mode of being beyond that. These teachings are provisional in that they help us understand, rather than explain directly, that further mode of reality.

Conversely, this sutra also clearly shows that the sutras and shastras that teach the final mode of being—the selflessness or emptiness of all things and events—are definitive, because no further interpretation of them is needed to be aware of the deepest level of reality. We are there!

Furthermore, within the provisional teachings, there are provisional teachings that we can accept literally, and those we need to interpret. For example, when the first noble truth talks about *dukkha*—suffering—that can be accepted literally because life does indeed have *dukkha*. It is still provisional, however, because it is not our life’s final mode of existence.

There are also some provisional teachings that are not to be taken literally. For example, there is a short sutra that the Buddha taught to a particular king who, out of ignorance, killed his parents. To help him out of his deep depression the Buddha taught him a verse stating that father and mother are to be killed. This of course makes no sense unless it is interpreted in a non-literal way. The “father” and the “mother” in this instance are delusion and karma, the “father” and “mother” of all our suffering; they need to be “killed” in order to experience liberation. Only when the king penetrated this startling statement did he understand the Buddha’s intent.

In the same way, in the scriptures of the definitive meaning there are some we can take literally and some that need to be interpreted. The most famous example of this is the *Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom Sutra*, which states that there is “no form, no feeling, no discrimination,” and so on. If you take these words at their face value, they may seem confusing. We have to look at the whole teaching and interpret the meaning from that, not think that because it is definitive every word needs to be taken literally.

## SELFLESSNESS IN THE THREE TURNINGS OF THE DHARMA WHEEL

Within Tibetan Buddhism, the definitive teachings on the view of selflessness are almost always taken from the Prasangika subschool of Madhyamaka, considered the most profound and subtle view of

selflessness. There have been many texts written about it, and in the great debate over the meaning of “empty of inherent existence,” the original words of the Buddha can become little more than a footnote. It is therefore very important to check the authenticity of such a view by tracing it back from Tibet to India, and from the great Indian masters to Shakyamuni Buddha himself.

Both the Theravada and Mahayana Buddhist traditions talk about the Buddha teaching by “turning the wheel of Dharma.” In the Mahayana tradition it is taught that there were three separate turnings of the wheel, each belonging to a different period of the Buddha’s life, and taught for a different audience, in a different place.

The sutras that belong to the first turning of the wheel of Dharma, such as those from the Pali canon, talk of no-self. There is no statement saying that things are absent of inherent existence, and this leaves the sutras open to interpretation according to the belief system of people who assume things have inherent existence. In the same way, scientists proposing a basic table of atomic elements—an atom of oxygen, of hydrogen, of carbon, and so on—often assume the inherent existence of those atoms. The term *emptiness* appears only rarely in the first turning, and does not have the meaning that is attributed to it by Prasangika Madhyamaka.

The main delineation of the path to enlightenment is the thirty-seven aspects, which are grouped into seven categories such as the four mindfulnesses and the noble eightfold path.<sup>8</sup> According to the Mahayana tradition, the sutras of the second turning of the wheel of Dharma reiterate and elaborate on these important topics. However, the more important shift is the way that the Buddha explains selflessness, within a collection of sutras collectively known as the *Perfection of Wisdom* sutras (Skt. *Prajnaparamitasutra*). Here, practitioners are encouraged to expand the scope of their contemplation on the nature of suffering and its origin from the overt evidence of suffering to the subtle imprints and

manifestations of these delusions. The Prasangika philosophers use the sutras from this turning in their exposition of emptiness.

In order to fully understand what cessation of suffering—the third noble truth—really means, selflessness or emptiness must also be understood. In the discourses of the first turning, cessation means the total abandonment of craving, but in the *Prajnaparamita* that concept is refined to include an understanding of the very root of cyclic existence and the theory of emptiness.

All the categories of emptiness described by the Buddha—the twenty, sixteen, four, and two emptinesses—deal with the total cessation of suffering rather than just the theory of emptiness. In the second turning of the Dharma wheel the teachings on the truth of cessation are an enlargement of those found in the first; they are much more detailed, profound, and complex.

The third turning of the wheel of Dharma came into being mainly because the Buddha's disciples had seen some apparent contradictions between the teachings in the first two turnings, particularly on the matter of emptiness. Specifically, the wording of the first turning implies that things such as form, feeling, and so on exist inherently, whereas the teachings of the second turning explicitly state that everything is empty of inherent existence. At the request of his disciples, the Buddha showed how there was in fact no contradiction.

There are many important sutras in the third turning, including *The Tathagata Essence Sutra* (*Tathagatagarbhasutra*) which talks about buddha nature, and *The Sutra Unraveling the Thought* (*Samdhinirmocanasutra*), which the Chittamatrin masters use as a main source to explain how subject and object are empty of duality.

*The Sutra Unraveling the Thought* is the one that reconciles the seeming contradictions between the teachings in the earlier turnings, specifically about whether things exist inherently or not. The Buddha explains how each sutra was taught dependent on the disposition and

understanding of his disciples. Rather than one being correct and one not, the difference is in the subtlety of the view.

It is good to be clear on this point. *The Four Noble Truths Sutra* in the first turning talks about *right view*—understanding how things really exist—which from the Mahayana perspective can be explained on many different levels. So what level of understanding of reality are we talking about? It is the same with the other extreme of ignorance. The sutras belonging to the first turning of the Dharma wheel say that ignorance is the root of our suffering. While nobody can deny this, what is that ignorance, actually? By what degree of misunderstanding the nature of self does the actual root develop? Again, from the Mahayana perspective there are many different degrees of ignorance in connection with the self.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama has said that when we reflect on the concepts explained in *The Four Noble Truths Sutra* they are like the presentation of a master plan of the entire Buddhist doctrine. They are the foundation upon which all the Buddha's teachings are built.

Understanding the teachings that the Buddha gives in the first turning is so important—especially the four noble truths. We must also understand that, while it seems that the first turning says that all things exist inherently, there is no contradiction between this and the teachings of the second turning. And it is these teachings of the second turning—those that categorically deny the inherent existence of anything—that we will be looking at in our exploration of emptiness.

## THE COMMENTARIES THAT DEAL WITH EMPTINESS

Whereas the sutras are the actual words of the Buddha, the shastras are the commentaries written about them. In the Mahayana tradition, the Indian and Tibetan masters wrote two kinds of commentary on the *Prajnaparamita* sutras:

- ♦ commentaries on the implicit meaning (the method side)
- ♦ commentaries on the explicit meaning (the wisdom side)

The implicit commentaries emphasize the path, structure, and methods that are only implicit within the *Prajnaparamita* sutras. These include works such as Maitreya's five treatises, including *The Ornament of Clear Realizations* (*Abhisamayalamkara*) and *The Ornament of Mahayana Sutra* (*Mahayanasutralamkara*), and Asanga's *Grounds for Meditative Practice* (*Yogacarabhumi*). On the other hand, in writings such as Nagarjuna's Six Treatises, his *Fundamental Treatise on the Middle Way* (*Madhyamakamulakarika*), Aryadeva's *Four Hundred Stanzas* (*Catuhshataka*) and its *Auto-commentary*, and Buddhapalita's texts, because the emphasis is on the emptiness of all phenomena found in the *Prajnaparamita* sutras, these are the explicit commentaries.

Nagarjuna is accepted as the master teacher of the Madhyamaka school. Tibetans believe that Aryadeva, Buddhapalita, Bhavaviveka, and Chandrakirti were all his direct disciples, and since their dates are known, some scholars have placed Nagarjuna as having taught in the fifth or sixth century C.E. Others have placed him earlier, in the second or third century C.E.

Both the followers of Bhavaviveka on the one hand, and Buddhapalita and Chandrakirti on the other, accept the writings of Nagarjuna and his spiritual son Aryadeva as fully valid. Nagarjuna's most famous work, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way* (*Mulamadhyamakakarika*), talks about how things do not exist in such-and-such a way while never actually using the words "empty of inherent existence." Moreover, Nagarjuna and Aryadeva never explicitly explain the methodology they used to prove the absence of true existence. Thus it is not clear whether their reasoning is based on autonomous syllogisms or consequential arguments, two sharply different forms of argument that we will discuss below. This

ambiguity led to a difference in interpretation by Nagarjuna's disciples, which in turn caused the formation of two subschools, Svatantrika and Prasangika, within Madhyamaka.

In the manner of Nagarjuna, Bhavaviveka's Svatantrika school does not mention the absence of inherent existence. His *Blaze of Reasoning* (*Tarkajvala*) even criticizes Buddhapalita's understanding of Nagarjuna.

Chandrakirti defended Buddhapalita, and in turn was critical of Bhavaviveka's position, asserting that when Nagarjuna talked about emptiness he was referring to emptiness of inherent existence. Chandrakirti clearly says in his texts that, as a Madhyamika, autonomous syllogisms—where reasons are established from their own side—are not powerful enough to establish the absence of inherent existence; only by using consequential reasoning—where assertions are established by attacking a logical stance until it falls into absurdity—will the practitioner realize the final mode of existence of things and events, which is their lack of inherent or intrinsic existence. Chandrakirti introduced the term *empty of inherent existence*, which is why he, rather than Buddhapalita, is considered the founder of the Prasangika subschool.

After that, many Tibetan masters wrote commentaries on emptiness. Lama Tsongkhapa wrote many texts, such as *The Essence of Eloquence* (the text that distinguishes between the provisional and definitive meanings), *The Ocean of Reasoning* (the commentary on Nagarjuna's *Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*), *The Elucidation of the Intention*, his commentary on Chandrakirti's *Introduction to the Middle Way* (*Madhyamakavatara*), and the *Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment* (Tib. *Lamrim Chenmo*), in which the special insight section deals with emptiness. In his commentaries on the great Indian masters, Lama Tsongkhapa clearly explains the explicit meaning of the *Prajnaparamita* sutras. In *Praise of Dependent Origina-*

tion and *The Three Principle Aspects of the Path* very clearly and strongly link Nagarjuna's theory of emptiness with the theory of dependent origination, showing how these are two sides of the same coin.

There are other great Tibetan masters, such as Longchen Rabjampa, who wrote amazing commentaries on Nagarjuna and the other Indian masters, but for this book I will use the (mostly Gelug) texts with which I am more familiar.

Because of our very busy lifestyles in the West, very few people are fortunate enough to study these texts in detail, and it would take a long time to read all the sutras and commentaries related to emptiness. We do have to be selective, but we also have to study the relevant and important ones again and again. I therefore thought it important to mention these texts in case you feel you would like to read them. Many are well-translated into English and other languages.