The Open Door To Emptiness

The Venerable Thrangu Rinpoche
The Open Door to Emptiness:
An Introduction to Madhyamaka Logic
The Open Door To Emptiness
An Introduction to Madhyamaka Logic

by
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Based on a part of
Mipham Rinpoche’s
Gateway to Knowledge
(Tib. mkhas pa’i tshul la ‘jug pa’i sgo)

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Note

Tibetan words are given as they are pronounced, not spelled. Their actual spelling can be found in the Glossary of Tibetan Terms.

We use the convention of BCE (Before Common Era) for “B.C.” and CE (Common Era) for “A.D.” We also use the abbreviations Tib. for “Tibetan” and Skt. for “Sanskrit.”

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The cover photo is of the entrance to the Chakrasamvara mandala located under Swayambhu in Kathmandu, Nepal.
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Nagarjuna

Shown here with snakes over his head protecting him and a naga bringing up the Prajnaparamita teachings from the depths of the waters.
Foreword to the Third Edition

In this text on emptiness Thrangu Rinpoche gives a carefully reasoned explanation of what emptiness is and why it is so important in understanding Buddhism. In this weeklong teaching he did not have time to cover the foundation to this topic. So in this foreword I would like to give some background with which a Western student may not be familiar. First will be a brief description of how the Middle-way or Madhyamaka school fits into the history of Buddhism and second, how the development of the theory of emptiness is intertwined with the philosophical theory of inherent nature.

The Foundation Vehicle

When the Buddha taught in India 400 years before our current era, his teachings were not written down but were passed on by an elaborate memorization process. The actual teachings of the Buddha were not like present Buddhist teachings with their structured topics enumerating points and conclusions. Rather, the Buddha traveled from town to town staying at wealthy patrons’ houses and answering questions put to him by laypersons and his large entourage of students. The topics of these questions were often quite random and the answers by the Buddha differed depending on the understanding of the audience. However, his advanced students carefully memorized these exchanges of the Buddha with members of the audience. For about the next hundred years Buddhist monasteries were built, housing hundreds of monks whose primary purpose was to preserve these teachings by passing them down orally from teacher to pupil.

In 304 BCE King Ashoka became ruler of most of India and after several years of being King, he embraced the Buddhist teachings and spread these teachings throughout India. He had rock pillars with inscriptions on how to conduct oneself as a Buddhist placed all over India. He sent emissaries to North Africa, Greece, Syria, and the Emperor’s court in China. In Kandahar, Pakistan, for example, he had a pillar inscribed in Aramaic (the language of Christ) and Greek. Ashoka’s son Mahina collected and carried the Buddhist teachings to Sri Lanka (Ceylon) where they were carefully written down and preserved in Pali—a language very close to the language of the Buddha.

The Pali teachings became the first Buddhist “bible” and were known as the sutras or “words of the Buddha.” They formed the basis of the Foundation Vehicle (also called the Theravada or the Hinayana teachings). These teachings of the Buddha began with his very first teaching on the Four Noble Truths given in Sarnath, India in a deer park. These teachings did not discuss, as most religions do, man’s relationship to God or gods, but began with the First Noble Truth that every human being (in fact every being with a mind) has a life containing suffering, as well as a strong desire to eliminate this suffering. In the next three Noble Truths he explained where this suffering comes from and how one can eventually eliminate it completely by becoming “enlightened”—or a much better translation would be “awakened.” A fully awakened individual is able to transcend this cycle of suffering called “samsara.”
Previous to the Buddha’s life several Indian philosophies held that each person had a self or ego (Skt. atman, Tib. dak) which according to the Bhagavad Gita is “eternal, unborn, undying, innumerable, primordial, and all-pervading.” This self is not our body or even our ordinary mind or personality, but rather a permanent “soul” which goes as a reincarnation from one body to the next body at death. The Buddha firmly rejected this doctrine of the self and instead taught the doctrine of anatman (Tib. dakme) or “nonself” often called “selflessness” or “egolessness.” The Buddha proposed that everything occurs because of cause and effect, and that the mind of an individual is like an endless river of flowing impressions, thoughts, and feelings that would not end abruptly with the death of a body, but would continue to flow into the fetus of the next person in whom the individual is reincarnated. This argument of the lack of a self, or the selflessness of a person, is discussed at length in Chapters 2, 3, and 4 of this book.

The Foundation Vehicle teachings emphasize that suffering comes about because of a false belief in a solid, real self. Because we falsely believe that we are separate from other beings, we then believe we are more important than others and therefore deserve more than others. The belief in this substantial self then leads to negative emotions and traits, such as jealousy and anger, which in turn lead to actions and beliefs whose outcome is not only suffering for ourselves, but also suffering for others.

So the Foundation Vehicle emphasizes reversing this innate desire to cherish ourselves more than others. We all carry around this story-line that we were born, were raised in such and such a way, had these people who helped us and those people who disliked us or treated us badly, that we like these things and don’t like those things, and so on. It is as if we think of our mind and “I” and also those around us as being substantial, real, and solid. The Buddhist practice for reversing this incorrect egocentric view of a substantial self has traditionally been called developing the “selflessness of self” or “egolessness.” Selflessness then is developing the realization that the self or “I” is not a substantial entity, but a mental construction. Selflessness, which is connected closely to compassion, is a fundamental tenet of all schools of Buddhism.

The Foundation school also describes a selfless or an egoless person who is a highly realized individual called an “arhat.” An arhat has complete and total awareness of his or her actions and therefore has completely pure behavior. Through careful meditation an arhat also develops the full realization of the insubstantiality (selflessness of self) of a person. The Foundation school, while believing the self to be insubstantial, or empty, believes, however, that outer phenomena, such as mountains, houses, and individuals, are real and substantial and not just mental constructs. The Foundation vehicle later became known as the “first turning of the wheel of Dharma.”

**The Abhidharma Movement**

After King Ashoka spread Buddhism across India, the great meditators and scholars began to systematize the Buddhist canon into concepts and categories. Since individual human beings and outside phenomena appear to be
impermanent and continually changing, it is almost impossible to define anything. For example, a cup can be round or square, it can be made of porcelain, tin, or, clay, it can be any color, and so it can’t be really defined by its appearance. It is also clear that everything arising or appearing in the real world is due to causes and their effects. A child learns to read (the cause) and then his mind expands with everything that he reads (the effect). Or a pumpkin seed is put in fertile ground in spring (the cause) and a pumpkin appears in the summer (the effect). The Buddhist scholars tried to reduce this flood of the variety of phenomena into basic, irreducible elements. From this developed the Abhidharma (“original dharmas”) teachings, which made lists of the entities (objects or thoughts) that had a single irreducible essence called “dharmas” (not to be confused with Dharma with a capital “D” which is the teachings of the Buddha).

For example, the Sarvastivada school posited 72 dharmas arranged into five different types: (1) eleven material dharmas such as sounds and forms of the external world; (2) one dharma of consciousness which they believed was irreducible into any other factors; (3) forty-six mental dharmas such as faith, shame, mental dullness, envy, and hatred; (4) fourteen dharmas that are qualities of mind combined with body such as birth and old age; (5) and three uncompounded dharmas such as space. The thrust of the Abhidharma philosophy was to imply that one could reduce the whole universe into a small number of basic building blocks. As Williams says, “The name given to these building blocks which are said to be ultimate realities in the sense that they cannot be reduced further into constituents is dharmas... The concept of self-existence or essence (Skt. svabhava) was a development of Abhidharma scholars, where it seemed to indicate the defining characteristic of a dharma.”

An example is that there is a dharma that is shared by all phenomena containing the earth element, which is “solidity and hardness” and this quality then is the nature or the essence of these phenomena.

During the time when Abhidharma theory was prevalent, great monastic universities were established in India where large numbers of both Hindu and Buddhist monks came together from many countries and studied, debated, and wrote treatises on the nature of reality. One such monastic university was Nalanda—the ruins of it are still visible today—which had 3,000 monks who came from a dozen countries. In these universities several philosophical schools were taught that suggested that most external phenomena, such as the human body or a house, are composite objects with the characteristics of being impermanent and made of many parts that combine and recombine into all kinds of appearances. However, they theorized that if one were to take these objects and divide them into smaller and smaller parts, one would eventually come to a single indivisible part, which we now call an atom. They believed that while composite phenomena are not real, these atoms are solid and real, or substantial. They did the same to the concept of time, which obviously is impermanent and continuous. They postulated that there was a small indivisible unit of time that could no longer be subdivided; and so these very small units of time are real and substantial. These arguments and their refutation are described in more detail by Thrangu Rinpoche in Chapter
Philosophers both in the East and the West from the time of the Buddha up to the time of the Madhyamaka school in 200 CE tried to describe phenomena in terms of their essence or nature\(^2\) (Skt. *svabhava*, Tibetan *rang zhin*) rather than their appearances. For example, fire has many different appearances, but the nature of fire is hot and burning. Or an apple tree, an actual apple, and an apple seed have very different appearances, but they all have the essence or nature of an apple fruit. This way we could describe items more precisely than describing them in terms of how they appear. A cup, for example, is said to usually be round and have a handle and also has the basic characteristic or essence of being a container whose purpose is for holding liquids to drink. This is the nature of the cup and its nature is based on its purpose or what it was created for.

**The Madhyamaka School**

In the first century CE there arose a school of Buddhism that is called the Madhyamaka in Sanskrit and Middle-way in English. This school challenged the idea that there are real existing dharmas or substantial or real external phenomena or indivisible real particles. In particular one person, Nagarjuna, is credited with founding the Middle-way school and writing the major treatises outlining the Middle-way interpretation of Buddhism. These became known as the second turning of the wheel of Dharma.

Besides being a great scholar, Nagarjuna was also one of the eighty-four mahasiddhas who were great practitioners of Mahamudra and who through their practice were able to develop special powers (*siddhis*). Nagarjuna is said to have gone into the Naga realm and brought back the *Prajnaparamita* teachings. These extensive teachings outlined the insubstantiality of person and insubstantiality of phenomena. There was, for example, the long *Prajnaparamita* of 25,000 verses, a medium length *Prajnaparamita* of 8,000 verses, and the well-known *Heart Sutra* of a few hundred words. These teachings were an elaboration of the teachings of the Buddha concerning, in particular, the teachings on emptiness.

Nagarjuna wrote many works, but his most famous work is the *Treatise on the Middle Way* (Skt. *Mula-madhyamaka-karika*). This work has been translated many times into English, and also into many other languages, and is so detailed that it is often studied for a full year in Tibetan monastic colleges called “shedras.” The Madhyamaka or Middle-way teachings on emptiness were different from the teachings of the first turning of the wheel of Dharma in that they posited that not only is the self, or ego, empty of inherent nature, but all external phenomena, such as trees, tables, and houses, are also empty of inherent nature. Furthermore, the Middle-way school added the concept of two realities, sometimes called the “two truths,” in which all composite phenomena were part of conventional reality or conventional truth, and permanent, enduring phenomena were part of ultimate reality or ultimate truth.

One of major problems for Westerners in understanding the Middle-way is understanding the translation of the word “emptiness.” The teachings of the Middle-way were originally written in Sanskrit. The Sanskrit word for “empty” as
in an “empty glass” is *shuna* and the quality of being empty is *shunyata*. However, when Buddhists and Indian philosophers used shunyata to describe the nature of reality, they did not mean entities were void of substance, but rather meant that entities “lacked any inherent nature.”

When the word shunyata was translated into Tibetan, the translators chose to translate it as *tong-pa-nyi*. The syllable *tong* means “empty” as in an empty glass and *pa* means “the quality of.” However, the Tibetan translators then added the syllable *nyi*. Tai Situpa says, “Then *nyi* is a very important part of the word, but I don’t know whether that is translated as ‘ness’ or not, as emptiness. *Nyi* actually means ‘that itself’... I think a good linguist could fix this problem in the future...”³

Westerhoff has pointed out, “emptiness is of course always the emptiness of something, and the something Nagarjuna has in mind here is *svabhava*. Different terms have been used to translate this word into English: ‘inherent existence’ and ‘intrinsic nature.’”⁴ Or as Hopkins has said in his *Meditation on Emptiness*, “phenomena are empty of a certain mode of being called ‘inherent existence,’ ‘objective existence’ or ‘natural existence.’”⁵

Understanding the idea of the “nature” or the “inherent existence” of phenomena is difficult for Westerners to understand, because the concept of “nature” or “essence” was abandoned by Western intellectual thinking at the time of Locke and Hume some 500 years ago. In modern times we never ask, “What is the inherent existence or nature of my car or of my spouse or of a buddha statue?”

Clearly, external phenomena do exist—we encounter this phenomenon every day, but when we say that they are lacking in inherent nature, we mean that they are insubstantial like a rainbow. Everyone can see a rainbow in the sky or a reflection of the moon in a lake at night, so these two phenomena do exist because we actually see them, but we also know that rainbows and reflections are “unreal” in that they are insubstantial. Nagarjuna’s main point was that phenomena too are insubstantial.

The Middle-way view is that outer phenomena do not have a substantial and real nature; therefore, phenomena are said not to have intrinsic nature. Or to say it another way, our perception of phenomena is a mental construction. Does saying “phenomena are empty” mean simply that phenomena really don’t exist? No, there are always appearances and these don’t just go away.

In Chapters 6, 7, 8, and 9 Thrangu Rinpoche presents a set of classical Middle-way arguments showing logically that emptiness of self and emptiness of phenomena are empty of inherent existence. This argument is based on “four causes” and these causes are closely related to inherent nature. The Padmakara Translation Committee explains it thus:

In the following discussion, the use of the word “cause” must be clearly understood. Classical Western philosophy (for the present purposes, Aristotle and the Schoolmen) speaks of four kinds of cause: material or substantial, formal, efficient, and final. These may be defined using the example of a sculptor carving a statue. The substance carved, e.g., the marble, is the material cause; the shape and other features of the statue being carved are the formal cause; the sculptor or, more immediately, the chisel acting on the
marble is the efficient cause; and the purpose for the work itself (e.g., that it will be used to adorn a public place) is the final cause. Although in modern English, “cause” is normally used only in the third sense (efficient cause), in the present context, and in Buddhist texts generally, it is used in the first sense: substantial or material cause. For example, an acorn is the [material] cause of the oak tree into which it develops.

THE IMPORTANCE OF UNDERSTANDING EMPTINESS

Thrangu Rinpoche has been asked many times what the relevance is of studying emptiness. His answer goes somewhat like this: First, the Buddha in his first teaching on the Four Noble Truths stated that all sentient beings seek permanent happiness in life. To achieve this happiness humans must work on their attachment to a self and to phenomena around us. Second, the belief in being a real, substantial person leads them to treat themselves as more interesting, more important, and more valuable than others. Third, this treating themselves as more important leads to the arising of negative emotions in their mind streams. These negative emotions and thoughts such as pride protect one’s ego by having thoughts such as “they shouldn’t have treated me that way” or “I know much more than these people and they should therefore respect me.” Finally, these negative thoughts lead to actions that through the law of karma keep beings firmly circling in cyclic existence—samsara.

To break these habitual patterns that we have accumulated for countless lifetimes, we must first conceptually realize that our self and outer phenomena are inherently empty and therefore we do not need to become attached to ourselves and all our samsaric activities. Also, understanding that samsara is non-substantial and therefore illusory allows us to reduce our involvement with it and to work instead on our own mind and begin helping others. This conceptual realization is done by studying the Middle-way—more precisely the logical arguments put forth first by Nagarjuna—that show us that our inner phenomena of thoughts and feelings and the outer phenomena of rocks and trees are all empty; that is, not having substantial, concrete existence. To be intellectually thoroughly convinced that everything is empty is not enough to develop full realization. Rather, we must also meditate on the mind to see for ourselves how outer phenomena register in the mind to see that the mind is truly empty.

Once we have truly realized the empty nature of phenomena, we will be able to see things as they truly are. With this realization we can then completely abandon those behaviors that create temporary happiness and adopt only those behaviors that lead to the true, complete happiness that is nirvana.

I once had a high lama (not Thrangu Rinpoche) tell me:

You know, being a rinpoche is an incredibly boring job. You get up early in the morning and practice and have breakfast. Then you get a constant stream of people coming to see you to tell you all their difficulties, all their problems, all their worries. Many of them want you to tell them what to do about their material circumstances, their confused personal relationships and so on.

Yet, when you are around rinpoches you see them happy and smiling and
laughing. Why is this? It is simply because they have realized the emptiness of our samsaric world.

— Clark Johnson, Ph.D.
In approaching the subject of the Middle-way (Skt. *madhyamaka*) we must first determine what this subject is. The Middle-way is *uma* in Tibetan and the word *uma* means “the middle.” It is called “the middle” because it avoids extremes; in this case, the extreme beliefs of eternalism and nihilism.\(^2\)

The actual meaning of Middle-way is this direct, straightforward view that does not fall into any extremes but is a view that at first is very difficult to understand. Because in ordinary life we do not initially hold this view, the Middle-way is taught. These instructions on the right view were first taught by Shakyamuni Buddha and were later commented upon by various highly realized teachers. The treatises of these commentators are referred to as “the *shastras* on Madhyamaka.” This book will concern itself with these commentaries on the Middle-way. This teaching on emptiness\(^8\) is presented so that students may begin to understand the fundamental nature of reality, enter the practice path to realization, and eventually attain freedom from suffering.

The Buddha Shakyamuni presented the Middle-way view many times in different ways and all of these can be subsumed under the three turnings of the wheel of Dharma. In the first turning shortly after the Buddha reached enlightenment, the Buddha taught the Four Noble Truths in Sarnath, India to many persons who didn’t have much experience with the Dharma. He taught that all ordinary existence (Skt. *samsara*) is suffering, that this suffering results from an individual’s own karma, and that this karma is created through the defiled nature of our own mind.

Defiled mind or a mind filled with disturbing emotions (Skt. *klesha*), he said, comes from our clinging to a notion of individual self or ego. Thus the Buddha first taught there is suffering inherent in all existence, and he then showed that the cause of this suffering is the ingrained habit we have of cherishing ourselves, and finally he showed that it is possible for us to free ourselves from this suffering by attaining nirvana.

In order to attain nirvana, it is not enough to have a desire or feeling that one wants to attain it; one must practice the path diligently to reach the complete cessation of suffering and the disturbing emotions. In this context, “the path” means eliminating the clinging to a notion of ego or a self. By doing so, one can be freed from the defilements of mind, freed from the necessity of creating continuing karma, and thus be released from the necessity of continued rebirths in the world.

In the first turning of the wheel of dharma, the Buddha did not specifically teach emptiness, though he did indirectly suggest it. The lack of ego that he taught in this turning was not the lack of self in an ultimate sense, but in the simpler sense that there is no permanent, solid individual ego or self-nature.

Later, at Rajgir in Northern India, the Shakyamuni Buddha taught the second turning of the wheel of dharma: the teachings on the lack of fundamental characteristics. He taught the sixteen modes of emptiness such as outer appearances are empty; the inner world of thoughts is empty; both outer and inner
events taken together are empty; and so on. In doing so, he demonstrated that not only in the ordinary sense is there no self, but no inherent reality can ever be found in anything, no matter how hard we look.

Later still, in Saravasti, India, the Shakyamuni Buddha taught the third turning of the wheel of dharma, in which he revealed that emptiness is not merely a void or nothingness, but an emptiness that gives rise to all phenomena and is continually expressive. This third turning included teachings on Buddha-nature (Skt. *tathagata-garbha*).

The distinction between the second and third turning is that in the second turning teachings at Rajgir, the Buddha taught that all phenomena are empty, meaning that all appearances of phenomena lack true existence. Whereas in Saravasti in the third turning he taught that emptiness is a foundation upon which all phenomena are based.

This is how the Buddha taught the correct view to sentient beings. He also taught many methods for recognizing the true nature of reality and he taught how to practice on the Mahamudra and the path of Dzogchen\(^9\) from the view of Middle-way.

Of the three turnings of the wheel of dharma, the first teaching on the Four Noble Truths is generally concerned with the Foundation Vehicle. The teachings on the sixteen modes of emptiness were expanded upon by Nagarjuna in the *Treatise on the Middle Way* and later by Chandrakirti in the *Introduction to the Middle Way* and by Shantaraksita in the *Ornament of the Middle Way* and also by Aryadeva in the *Treatise of Four Hundred Stanzas*. These works clarified the view of emptiness, as well as the true nature of phenomena.

After about 100 years, the Bodhisattva Maitreya gave Asanga five commentaries in verse\(^10\) on the third turning of the wheel of dharma concerning Buddha-nature. Asanga transmitted the teachings on these five works of Maitreya and wrote commentaries on them. The view of the third turning of the wheel of dharma developed from these explanations.

Nagarjuna and his pupil Aryadeva mainly did the description of emptiness according to the second turning of the wheel of Dharma. These teachings are called the *Rangtong* teachings in Tibetan. Rangtong literally means “empty of self,” or that the true nature of all appearances is empty. The explanation according to the third turning elaborated by Asanga is called the *Shentong* teachings, which literally means “empty of other.” The Shentong teachings briefly emphasize that emptiness itself is not merely empty, but expresses all the qualities of buddhahood. The actual means for realizing the true nature of phenomena is no different in the two systems; the only distinction between these two views is the way in which emptiness is explained.\(^11\)

In general, if we consider our own experience, we find that we have the five perceptual aggregates of form, which are the external objects we perceive, sensations, identification, formations, and consciousness. In examining these aggregates, we can see that none of these is permanent. Our bodies were very small when we were born and gradually grew larger. Now our bodies are aging and will eventually deteriorate and die. So we can easily see that the body, which
is an example of form, is impermanent, and, similarly, sensations, formations, and consciousness are also impermanent.

There are many different ideas about how we come to be born within this kind of impermanent structure. Some people think that there is an omniscient individual such as a god who is manipulating everything, causing people to take birth here and there in this and that form. Other people feel that external scientific forces in the world bring about birth in different places and varying conditions. But Buddhism proposes quite a different theory. According to Buddhism, everything occurs due to the karma which we have ourselves created.

I was born in Tibet and this was due to the force of karma created in my previous lives. All of you were born in the West due to karma created in your past lives. We were born at a time of particular instability, due to the strength of our karma. So, although I was born in Tibet, my karma brought about my birth at a time when conditions there were very unstable and would eventually force me to come to India. Similarly, although you were born in the West, conditions brought you here to this teaching in Kathmandu, Nepal. Our birth, and the various conditions we experience, is a product of our own karma.

The reason for the creation of all this karma which brings about our existential situation is that we have been continually acting out based on our disturbing emotions of aggression, desire, pride, jealousy, and so on. We have been impulsively acting out on these disturbing emotions or afflictions because we have been clinging to the belief in a self. This false assumption that we are a real solid self has been forcing us from one condition to another causing us many situations of suffering. We can only be freed from this continuous cycle by understanding that the nature of emptiness, the true nature of reality, is that there is no true existence of an ego.

In considering this true nature that there is no substantial self, we can see that reality must always be just as it is. Our not recognizing it, our misunderstanding of the nature of reality, does not affect reality at all. The true nature of reality has been as it is from the very beginning. Since we seem to have been deluded about the nature of reality, we might ask, “Even after recognizing the nature of reality, is it not possible to become mistaken about it again, and slide back into delusion?”

This is not possible because a falling back into delusion would require a basic impulse of ignorance. There would have to be some sort of feeling that emptiness is unsatisfactory or unreal. But, having actually recognized emptiness, we find that falling back does not occur because the experience of emptiness is a blissful state of mind, continuously and brilliantly expressive of Buddha-qualities. By experiencing emptiness, we are freed from the suffering of cyclic existence or samsara and there is no impulse to stray into delusory perceptions again. When we have actually recognized this true nature, we become convinced beyond the possibility of reversion, no matter how much pressure is exerted by conditions or by friends.

If the true nature itself were to change, there might then be some loss of realization after it had been attained. But it is ridiculous to think that the true nature of the universe undergoes transformation. For example, it would be absurd
to imagine that last year everyone was egoless, but now everyone has a real ego. We can easily see that the true nature is unchanging and that there can be no reversion from the enlightenment of buddhahood.

In the stories of the Buddha’s previous lives, we can find many examples illustrative of how buddhahood is impervious to all obstacles and interference. One such story is about a bodhisattva who was once born as a king named Mahadatta. He had some insight into emptiness and this expressed itself as a great impulse to give. So Mahadatta was always giving things away, making large offerings, giving alms to poor people, and so on. One day while he was eating his food, he noticed a beggar trying to collect alms and immediately told a servant to give him some food. But before the servant could get to the door, the beggar began to walk away. So Mahadatta himself jumped up and, grabbing his own plate of food, ran out to give it to the beggar.

While he was chasing the beggar, he experienced a demonic vision and suddenly saw in front of him a very hot hell, wherein the inhabitants were suffering greatly. To one side of this hell was a demon who was inflicting great suffering on these beings. The demon called out to Mahadatta asking him if he knew why the beings were suffering. Mahadatta replied that he did not, but that they were certainly suffering terribly. The demon then replied that all these beings had defiled their family lineages. Their ancestors in previous lives had worked hard and had done many things in order to accumulate family wealth, but these people had given it away and had thus defiled their family lineages. Because of having done this, they were reborn in hell.

Mahadatta stopped and thought about this for a minute and then said to the demon, “Did the things they gave away help the people who received them?” There is really only one answer to this because when we give people something, it usually helps them. The demon replied, “Of course, what they gave helped the recipients, but it caused the beings themselves to be reborn in hell.” Mahadatta then said, “If the things I give away will help people, then take me to hell, then I’ll continue to give things away in hell. If I go to hell for helping others, that is fine with me.” The apparition then disappeared. This story shows that with the perception of emptiness no obstacle can ever harm one’s basic understanding.

It is extremely important to understand emptiness because not understanding emptiness prevents us from realizing the true nature of reality, which is hidden from us by the two obscurations. These are the emotional obscurations of the disturbing emotions such as anger, desire, and ignorance and the cognitive obscurations such as dualistic thinking of “I” and “other.”

To purify or eliminate these two kinds of obscurations and to recognize the two truths (the conventional truth and the ultimate truth), we must begin by recognizing the insubstantiality of self and the insubstantiality of phenomena.
Chapter 2: The Insubstantiality of Self

We will begin our examination of the Middle-way by examining the truth of there being no substantial or independent self, or what is called the “egolessness of self.” Almost all of us have the dualistic experience of some kind of agent behind our actions, someone who is causing whatever we are doing and is a subject of our experience—someone who is experiencing it. But, when we examine this with analytic insight, we discover that there is actually no such experiencer or person experiencing at all.

The Self as the Aggregates

The five aggregates (Skt. skandhas) are compounds and have no independent reality of their own. The five perceptual aggregates are form, feelings, concepts, formation, and consciousness. These are processes of perception and we can see that if each of the aggregates were an independent entity, there would have to be many selves that exist inside us simultaneously because the aggregates of form, feelings, concepts, formation and consciousnesses are all discrete, separable appearance. If each aggregate possessed a real self, there would be many distinct selves.

It is also fallacious to suppose that only one of the aggregates is the real self. For example, if we examine the aggregate of form which is our body, we readily see that it is not a unitary thing, but consists of a number of parts—arms, legs, torso, and so on—each of which is in turn made up of smaller units. Thus no single unit can be found for the aggregate of form.

The same is true of the other aggregates. If feelings were an independent entity and were actually the self, there would have to be more than one self because there are three basic types of feelings—happy, unhappy, and neutral. Furthermore, feelings change from one moment to another so from the time we awoke this morning to the time we went to sleep we would have had a number of different selves. Something as impermanent and unstable as feelings could hardly be the nature of our true self. Similarly, ideas, impulses and consciousnesses are all compounds composed of a number of individual units and could not in themselves be our true self.

The five aggregates are also in constant flux. The conditions prevailing at one moment disappear and arise the next moment as something different. The five aggregates are not fixed things, but are a flow of circumstances from one moment to the next.

Thus we have the argument that the aggregates are all quite impermanent. If they were a real solid self, there would have to be as many selves as there are moments of time and there would be a huge number of selves rather than a particular, single self. In short, it is absurd to think that there is a real, true, independent self that is made of the aggregates.

Having determined that the five aggregates are not solid entities that make up the self, we might conclude that there is, however, a solid self or “me” that is distinct from these ever-changing five aggregates. But our experience is that all
our perceptions and all our conceptualizations arise from these five perceptual aggregates, so we would have to propose a self that is a single uncompounded entity that is independent of our perceptual experience and therefore would be beyond thought. But all our experience of the world arises from these aggregates. A self, or a soul, beyond the compounded aggregates would necessarily have to be an existent entity that is uncompounded, non-experiential, and inconceivable. But if there were such a self that was solid and real, how would happiness and suffering in the ordinary world initially arise? A self beyond the aggregates would not experience changing events of the aggregates and, like uncompounded space, would be beyond contact, benefit, and harm. A self separate from the aggregates would never be able to function in the ordinary world where things arise and fall. We would never have experienced any of the compounded events that we experience. Thus, there is no self beyond the aggregates.

The Self Other Than the Aggregates

Another view of self that we might take is that of the Vatsiputriya school which is an ancient Buddhist school in India. The Vatsiputriya view was that there is a self, but this self is neither identical to the aggregates nor different from them; it is neither permanent nor impermanent; the self or “I” is totally indescribable, but nonetheless exists as an entity.

This position is also absurd. We cannot just opt for a situation in which things that are impermanent are not permanent by virtue of their being a self. We cannot simply say those things that exist can also be said to not exist. If there were a self, it would have to be either uncompounded (i.e. single) or compounded, either permanent or impermanent. These categories are mutually exclusive because no category such as “neither impermanent nor permanent” or “neither unitary nor compounded” is possible. Therefore, the view of the Vatsiputriya adherents of a hypothetically real self must be incorrect.

We can see why the Vatsiputriya school was incorrect from a very simple example. An object could be either yellow or blue, or it could be neither yellow nor blue. In this case it would be quite logical for it to be neither because, for example, it might be white. This is because yellow and blue are not specifically antithetical. But, if we ask whether an object were either yellow or not yellow, a third alternative is impossible. It might be either yellow or not yellow, but there is no conceivable way for it to be neither yellow nor not yellow. No third alternative is available when two propositions are specifically antithetical. Thus the self postulated by the Vatsiputriyas as a solid and real entity cannot exist.

The Shakyamuni Buddha established the lack of any substantial existence from twenty erroneous points of view (see chart on page 82). He said, first of all, that form is not itself a reality; secondly, that form and self are not in manipulative relationship with either form controlling self or self controlling form; thirdly, that no self abides in form; and, fourthly, that form does not abide in any self. Applying these same denials of self to the other skandhas makes up the remaining sixteen proper views that refute mistaken positions. These twenty erroneous views of the emptiness of self are like a mountain with twenty peaks. They all start with the
fundamental belief in an inherent self (the mountain) and then develop this wrong idea in different ways (the peaks).

**The Conditioned View of Self**

For example, when a child is born, he or she does not need to be taught the idea of an ego; the child will develop the view of being a single, solid entity spontaneously. Even an animal, though unable to articulate its thoughts, has a conception of self. Animals are not very intelligent, but they do conceive of protecting their own existence. In fact, it is extremely difficult for any sentient being to give up the idea of its own existence.

Besides our ordinary conditioning that we hold an innate belief in a solid self, there are various religious beliefs teaching that there is actually a self. Not only this, but there are scientific beliefs that people possess a self that is real and resides in the brain.

**Summary**

The Buddha taught that individuals hold twenty mistaken views of existence of the person. These twenty erroneous views that a person is a solid real entity can be expanded to apply to views to the past, the present and the future making sixty erroneous views of self. When we add the erroneous view that self is real and substantial and the erroneous view that others are real and substantial to these sixty views, we get the sixty-two incorrect views of a self that are mentioned in the sutras.

There are innumerable ways in which we could arbitrarily designate some kind of solid reality of self. Different religious sects have adhered to many such views, and it is also possible that we might spontaneously develop some of them. All of these views, however, can be shown to be erroneous by recognizing the insubstantiality of an individual. We can summarize these theories for believing in a solid self into four main arguments.

First, we might feel that, although there is no self that is perceptible, its existence can be inferred from circumstantial evidence. If we go to a potter's shop and do not find the potter, but see his throwing wheel and potter's implements, we might think that the potter must be have been there. The potter was obviously there, because his implements are all about. In this example, we could make an inference that the potter certainly had been there, even though we had not specifically seen him. Using the same logic, we might decide that there is a real self due to circumstantial evidence. We might decide to take our own experience as evidence and feel that because we eat, sleep, see things, and so on that this implies the existence of the self. Many people who adhere to the reality of the self use this logic, that to say there is no self is simply to deny what everyone always acknowledges in their ordinary lives. When we say “my body,” “my food,” “my house,” “my bed,” and so on we refer to ourselves in relation to all of these things. If there were no self, all of these assertions and conventions would be meaningless.

Second, let us examine the possibility that there might be a permanent self.
Believing something is permanent implies that it doesn’t change when things around it change. If the self were solid and permanent, then anything we do—such as virtuous or unvirtuous actions—wouldn’t change how we turn out. If there were a permanent self, conditions could not vary. All these momentary phenomena would be impossible under the conditions of a permanent self. If there were a single, unitary self, all the various circumstances of the world could not arise. So the oneness of reality would never give any opportunity for variance of beings.

Third, let us examine the possibility that there is a god or gods who made individual selves. But there also cannot be a universal manipulator who is controlling everything, because if there were a god or supreme creator, how could momentary impermanence and suffering arise? If there were any kind of universal manipulator, there would never be any suffering or impermanence.

Fourth, let us examine the possibility that there could be an eternal self or atman that is pervasive. Space is pervasive and never changes, but if a self were pervasive like space, there would never be any relational qualities such as near and far, separation and connection, self and other, virtue and nonvirtue. Because of the singular quality of pervasiveness, all of the individual details of the world would not occur. Therefore, we can see that these notions of a god or universal reality presented above are all absurd.

**Questions**

**Question:** You say there is no permanent self. But there might be an impermanent self from time to time, say in each lifetime.

**Rinpoche:** If there is sometimes a self and not a self at other times as you have posited, when there is a self, where is it? Is it one of the aggregates? Is it related to one of the aggregates? Or is it separate from all the aggregates?

**Question:** The self seems to be the central point or controller of all the aggregates.

**Rinpoche:** This, then, falls into the Vatsiputriya view that there is a self which can never be described as being either the same as the aggregates or distinct from the aggregates.

**Question:** Can we get a clear definition of what is self?

**Rinpoche:** We always think about a self; we always think, “I want some food,” “I want to do this,” “I want to be happy,” and so on. This “I” that we are always thinking of and referring to is what we designate as a “self.” Although we always refer to it, if we examine carefully, we can never find such an “I.” It does not exist as a solid entity.

**Question:** That’s on the ultimate level or truth. But on the conventional level, aren’t there “I” and “others?”

**Rinpoche:** Yes. All the teachings on the “non-self” concern the ultimate level, not the conventional level. They are taught for the purpose of allowing disciples to recognize the nature of reality in order that they can meditate on it and attain
In practicing meditation we must always meditate on the ultimate level, because the conventional truth is composed of illusory manifestations. The ultimate level or reality is the fundamental nature; in order to meditate on the fundamental nature, we study the teachings on “not-self.”

**Question:** Could we say that the self was not compounded phenomena?

**Rinpoche:** This would not suffice because we are always acting and doing things in the world. If there were a self characterized by not being compounded, it would have nothing to do with the self that we always refer to, because the self we always refer to has a relational aspect, in terms of “I want to eat,” “I want to do this,” and so on. If there were an uncompounded self, then it would have nothing to do with the self of which we are always conceiving.

**Question:** What if I killed someone and I said in court that I did not do it because I did not believe in a self?

**Rinpoche:** In ultimate terms, there was no one who was killed, no one who did the killing, no one who was arrested and taken to court, and no one who was put in prison. On the conventional level, someone was killed, someone killed him and someone was taken to court and put in jail.

**Question:** So isn’t it just the link between conventional and ultimate truth that we are looking for?

**Rinpoche:** The conventional factors manifest by themselves. What we have to do in meditation is to clear them of all our erroneous notions and feelings. We meditate on the ultimate nature in order to recognize the true nature of nonself. The conventional factors arise by themselves and we do not have to meditate on them.

There is a traditional example of going into a dark room and seeing a rope, but thinking that it is a snake. We react with fear and panic because we have misperceived reality. So if we were to meditate on the conventional reality i.e. on the misperception that the rope is a snake, we would only increase our fear. We should meditate on ultimate reality, which is the understanding that it is just a rope.

**Question:** If there is no self, who is this one who is doing all these things?

**Rinpoche:** The idea of an agent, that someone is doing all this, is a result of our basic belief in a substantial self. If we do not have this basic idea of a self, then we cannot conceive of anyone doing anything. The basic idea of a self comes from attributing reality to something or other. We can see its absurdity by analysis.

For example, if I hold up my hand everyone will say this is clearly a hand and it exists. But if I analyze carefully I see this hand is made up of five fingers. Is the thumb a hand? No. Is the index finger a hand? No. And so on with each finger. We may then say that a hand exists because it is a combination of fingers. But if we take a finger, we see that it is made of a nail, skin, the first joint, and so on. By
continually applying this analysis, we begin to see that a “hand” is not a real solid entity, but rather it is a conceptual designation that our mind puts on this and calls it “a hand.” When we apply this to what we think of as “our self,” we find out that what we call “self” or “I” is a huge collection of parts that are constantly changing. But just like the hand, our mind and other individuals take this huge collection for a solid, real entity, which we call a “self.”

**Question:** If there were nothing there in the first place, nothing would abide by itself.

**Rinpoche:** We cannot deny the experience of the aggregates. The aggregates seem to be there, but our recognition of the aggregates is not particularly stable. Every moment we have a new experience of them.
Chapter 3: Developing Certainty of The Insubstantiality of Self

These teachings are being given according to the *Gateway of Knowledge* by Jamgön Ju Mipham Namgyal, often called Mipham Rinpoche. The *Gateway of Knowledge* has many sections on astrology, the Abhidharma, and so on. At the back of the text there is a section on the four cardinal principles of Buddhism: the suffering of existence, the impermanence of compounds, the peace of nirvana, and the lack of self-existence. This fourth principle on the lack of self-existence is a concern of the Middle-way, which we are studying.

The teaching on non-self is a discussion that applies to the level of the ultimate, not relative or conventional truth. The purpose of approaching this teaching on non-self is to develop the appropriate meditation on the true nature of reality. It is meaningless to meditate on anything other than the ultimate nature of reality.

In general, most religious and spiritual traditions believe in a self. It is a fundamental feature of Buddhism that it does not believe in the validity of any notion of a self. This means that in trying to discover this supposed self we can never find any such entity. There is no such thing as the self. The purpose behind examining non-self is to demonstrate that all of our projections, all our disturbing emotions or defilements (Skt. kleshas), come from an erroneous notion of a self to which we are continually grasping. If we can get to the point of recognizing that this notion is a fallacy, we can cut off defilements at the root and purify our mind. If we cannot do this, the defilements will be unending.

The impossibility of there being an individual self in the body, speech, or mind and the impossibility of there being a self in any particular thing, or of there being a self distinct from everything, has already been discussed. What do you think about these points? What kind of ideas do you have about them? What do you think about this situation? Do you think there must be some kind of self in one or the other of the skandhas? Do you think there must be some kind of self that is distinct from the skandhas? Do you think it might be possible that there is no such thing as a self at all?

Questions

Question: There must be a kind of self because you hear stories about beings like the bodhisattvas who developed the thought of enlightenment through lifetime after lifetime in a continuity. There must be something there that continues whether we call it a self or not.

Rinpoche: There are many stories, but where is the self that is the self in all these stories? If it were in one of the aggregates, then the bodhisattvas could not progress from one lifetime to another lifetime—so it could not be in one of the aggregates.

This is similar to the example of going to the potter’s shop. We might think from observing a bodhisattva working for sentient beings from lifetime to lifetime that there must be a self, even if no one has seen it. But this does not prove the existence of a self. Unless we can find some sort of self, we cannot prove its existence by mere circumstantial evidence.
**Question:** There is a state called “self-realized.” Can there be a stage called “self-realized” if there is no self to realize? What do you mean by “self?”

**Rinpoche:** It is not necessary that there be a self in order for us to have the idea of a self. We might be wrong. For instance, in the ordinary world if someone describes something in accordance with the way things are then we generally say that the person is right. If someone feels that things are the way they are not, we say he is wrong. There is always a possibility of being wrong.

For instance, if I sit here and think, “A lot of people have come here today,” everyone will agree with me. On the other hand, if the room were empty, and I saw many people in the room, then I would be wrong. Although these things might appear to me, they would be mere illusory appearances. The nature of the self is similar to this. It seems to be there, but actually it is not.

The Buddha gave eight examples of how something could appear but have no substantial reality, like the reflection of the moon in water, the reflection of one’s own face in a mirror, a mirage in an empty plain, the illusory appearances created by people who do magic and so on. These are examples of things that appear to us and others, but which have no reality other than the fact that someone sees them, such as hallucinations, rainbows, and so on. For example, a hundred people standing on the shore of a calm lake at night will see the moon in the lake even though the moon is not really there in the lake, but merely a reflection. The self is similar in that although there seems to be some kind of self, actually no real self can ever be found.

**Question:** Is there a mind?

**Rinpoche:** At the ultimate level of there being no solid reality at all, there is no mind. But if one has recognized only that there is no self-nature in individuality, there is nothing wrong with feeling that there is a self in the mind.

**Question:** How did all this karma get started?

**Rinpoche:** We create karma because of the illusory appearances that we experience. Karma functions in this conventional level and we experience the results of karma within the same conventional reality. If we examine the true nature we discover that, actually, no karma has been created, nor have the results of any karma been experienced.

**Question:** Is there any karma?

**Rinpoche:** On the conventional level of truth there is karma. On the ultimate level there is not.

We begin by listening to the idea that there is really no self and try to understand what is meant by this idea. Then, we must contemplate it and examine our experience and try to find where this self is and we realize that actually there is no solid self to be found. Then after this, we can practice the meditations of Tranquility and Insight and actually recognize the selfless nature. Because grasping at the notion of an ego is the root of all disturbing emotions, in recognizing selflessness, all the disturbing emotions dissolve by themselves. We do
not have to give up anything in particular to attain realization.

**Question:** Who is the one who is looking to find out what is the self, what is non-existent? Who can look if no one is there?

**Rinpoche:** Although there is no self on the ultimate level, at the moment we are in the frame of reference of thinking that there is a self. So, starting from this frame of reference, we work within it and start to look for the self.

**Question:** This idea of self itself, which is only an idea, is going to look for itself? Is that what you mean to say?

**Rinpoche:** Yes. We have this notion of self and this notion of there being a self beginning to look for itself. In looking for itself, we are gradually able to recognize that it is an erroneous notion. In recognizing that it is an erroneous notion, we arrive at the view of the lack of an inherent self.

Suppose I had a statue and was worried about someone stealing it. Further suppose that I put it into a box and locked it up and then went away and forgot that I had put the statue away. When I came back, I saw that the statue was not where it was supposed to be. Then, I think Lodro has stolen my statue. I might decide to go into Lodro’s room and take all of Lodro’s things out of his drawers, look at everything on his altar, and try to find the statue. I would not find my statue because Lodro didn’t steal it in the first place. So, I might try to find some alternative and might think that maybe I had made a mistake. Then going through all my own things I find the statue in the box. As soon as I found the statue in the box, the idea that Lodro had stolen my statue would vanish immediately.

**Question:** If you find out that you do not exist, what is the use of going on?

**Rinpoche:** In merely recognizing that there is no substantial self, that the belief in a self is erroneous, we do not completely counteract the habitual clinging to a notion of self. This is because from all our many previous lifetimes, we have become habituated to clinging to this notion of self. Merely recognizing that there is no substantial self will not make the notion of self vanish.

However, by getting to the point of recognizing lack of self and meditating on this selfless nature, we can gradually reach and develop insight into the insubstantiality of self and cut off all our erroneous notions. However, because we cling to this notion of a self, we continue to aggrandize this self, to work for our own benefit over others. By eliminating the incorrect notion of a self we develop the desire to impartially work for the benefit of all sentient beings spontaneously, as in the activities of a Buddha.

In considering the substantial self, it is important to make a clear distinction between the self itself and the mere attribution of self. The “self” refers to some inherent nature, some real thing, which is the own being of the individual. The attribution of self, or the clinging to an idea of self, is the idea we have that we really exist. Everybody is thinking, “I am,” “Here I am,” etc. No one can deny that the attribution of self is an experience. The question arises whether or not this attribution of self corresponds to any reality. If it corresponds to a reality, then the
idea “I am” is a correct idea. If it does not, if there is no genuine self to whom it corresponds, if there is no reference for this notion of self, then this attribution of self is meaningless.

In looking for the nature of self, we are looking for the self itself, to see if there is any corresponding reality to this fundamental notion we have that causes us to attribute a self.

**Question:** What motivation does one have to help another sentient being if the self is non-existent?

**Rinpoche:** Although we do not perceive a self in this level of understanding, either in ourselves or in other sentient beings, nonetheless, the experience of suffering does occur. When the bodhisattva perceives that others are suffering, the bodhisattva’s compassion arises in relation to the suffering, but not in reference to a specific self or specific sentient being. The compassion of a bodhisattva relates to experiential suffering.

**Question:** Is suffering destroyed with the destruction of the realization that the self is non-existent?

**Rinpoche:** When we attain insight into the lack of self, we no longer suffer. However, the suffering of other sentient beings is not pacified. The experience of each sentient being is distinct.

When the Buddha attained realization, sentient beings continued to suffer until they too had attained realization. The Buddha also recognized that other sentient beings are experiencing the delusive appearance of suffering, but the Buddha himself was not deluded or confused by it.

**Question:** If I came to realize the non-existence of the self, what would prevent me from committing a non-virtuous action right after that realization? For instance, I read in a religious book that because of emptiness no one is really killed. What would prevent me from committing an unvirtuous action like going out and killing someone?

**Rinpoche:** Virtuous action is a method for attaining the correct realization of no true self. Unvirtuous action aggrandizes and solidifies this notion of a self. In recognizing the actual lack of self, why would you commit any unvirtuous action? How would you benefit by it? If there is no self, there is nothing to benefit. There would never be any impetus to kill someone because killing could not benefit anything and neither would it harm anything.

In reference to the religious book you read, it would seem to me that it represents a tradition of selflessness “of the mouth.” Although there is the intellectual notion of selflessness, there is no insight into this selflessness. This is apparent because a true Dharma book will not advise actions that benefit a self. If the book advises actions benefiting a self, it is still subtly attributing a self, not selflessness.

**Question:** So, if there is no motivation to kill, is there also no motivation to do good?
Rinpoche: This is not completely the case because in recognizing that there is no real self, we also recognize the suffering that is still being experienced by so many others. Although the ordinary impulse to benefit a particular individual does not occur because we do not recognize an individual, in recognizing selflessness we still tend to relate to the suffering experienced by others and to have compassion for them.

For example, if a man got drunk and started to shout and throw his weight around, hit people, and so on, nobody would really get angry with him. People would just be very warm and compassionate, pat the drunk on the back and advise him to cool off a bit. This is because, being drunk, he would not really be in command of his faculties. Someone sober would have no particular reason to get angry with him; he would just try to calm him down. Similarly, someone who has recognized selflessness has a compassionate and loving feeling towards sentient beings who are continually creating their own suffering through their own delusions.

If somebody sober came up here and picked up my cup and threw it to the ground and broke it, I would get angry with him. But if a drunk were staggering around and threw the cup on the ground and broke it, I would just think that he was drunk and that he broke the cup. Similarly, when someone who has the insight into selflessness views the experience of all beings, he or she sees that they are just confused and deluded; they continue to create all kinds of suffering for themselves. From this perspective, the enlightened person has an especially strong feeling of compassion for all these beings who are creating their own suffering through their own delusions.

Question: If someone understands non-self from an undeluded point of view, how does he or she function in the world? If you do not get involved with ordinary things, taking them to be real, how would you function?

Rinpoche: The condition of recognizing insubstantiality of self is certainly quite functional. The Shakyamuni Buddha attained this recognition and then gave a vast number of Dharma teachings. He brought innumerable beings to realization, spread the Dharma far and wide, and benefited all sentient beings. He seemed to be quite functional.

In recognizing the true nature that there is no substantial self, we relate to the ultimate level of reality. We can still relate in terms of ordinary worldly appearances and function within the field of the arising of various appearances. We need not take ultimate reality naively, in the sense that it seems to annihilate appearances. Appearances still arise and we can still relate to them.

Question: Isn’t it a bit paradoxical to relate on one level to the conventional existence of self and then carry in the back of your mind a dual structure of conventional self and ultimate non-self?

Rinpoche: The two are not specifically opposed to each other. In this ordinary world of wearing clothes, eating food and so on, we relate to appearances, to the mundane world as it seems to be. In relating to the ultimate nature, realization of
buddhahood, we recognize that there is no real nature in any of this and it is all fundamentally empty.

**Question:** So is it correct to say that you look upon this mundane world as a kind of dream, yet when you wake up from the dream you realize there is no basis for any event in the dream. Is that the way you go through life?

**Rinpoche:** Yes, that is more or less it. When we are dreaming, we can think that we are dreaming, and eventually we will wake up. In working in the world, we may think this is some kind of illusory appearance similar to a dream and at some point we will wake up to the realization of buddhahood. The realization of buddhahood is slightly different from waking up from a dream, but they are quite similar.
Chapter 4: The Benefits of Understanding Non-Self

In the discussion on the view of the insubstantiality of a self, or selflessness, we will now discuss the special qualities and benefits of the understanding of non-self.

Non-Self as a Basis for Liberation

If there were a real self, liberation would be impossible. If the self were actually a real thing, we would become attached to it. If there were something there to become attached to, we would not be able to give up attachment to it. With the proposition that there is such a thing as a real self, we cut off the possibility of liberation.

Furthermore, if there were a real self we would become attached to ourselves, and from this thinking we would begin to think and feel, “This is mine,” “I have this,” “I am doing this,” “This is not mine,” “He is doing that,” and so on, thus discriminating between ourselves and others. We would become attached to a self and thus place ourselves in ordinary samsara. This would effectively deny us the possibility of attaining realization.

On the other hand, if there is no actual self, there is the potential for liberation because there is no real self to be attached to. With no real solid self it is possible to release oneself from attachment to “I” and “other” and attain realization and freedom from suffering.

Someone might ask, “If there is no self, how can there be any reason for us to do virtuous actions and avoid actions that are unvirtuous?”

We can see that these are not in any way connected with the view of self or non-self. In denying that there exists any kind of self, we are not denying the empirical experiential qualities of the successive flow of different modes of the aggregates, or the successive experiences and impressions that we receive. We create various forms of karma, with good karma coming from doing virtuous actions and negative karma from performing unvirtuous actions. From these various positive and negative activities, there will later arise various effects or results. For instance, if I killed someone, even if that action brought no effect in this lifetime, I might be reborn in a hell realm. This flow of the creation and fruition of karma continues based on the flow of conditions and results of virtuous and unvirtuous actions. Whether we decide that a self has an inherent reality or not has no bearing on what happens within this cycle. There are different views concerning this cycle’s fundamental nature, but they do not affect its function. So holding a view of self or non-self does not affect the idea of virtuous and unvirtuous actions and their results.

Seven Analyses of a Cart

Let us now consider the example of a cart. Shakyamuni first used the example of the cart in a sutra, in a rather brief form. Later on, Chandrakirti expanded this example and explained its significance in full. The example is an illustration of how and why there is no self. We can see that a cart is a very useful object. It has a
particular function that everyone can agree on: it is used to carry things from one place to another. But if we examine a cart, we see that this “cart” is merely a designation that we have placed on it, a convenient mental label and there is no truly existent cart.

(a) First, we could examine its parts. We can see that it has wheels, a bed, a railing, and a harness pole. But each of these things is merely what it is—the wheel is not the cart, nor is the bed the cart, nor is the railing the cart, nor is the pole the cart. Each of these things is just itself; the wheel, the pole, and so on are not the cart. If we take it completely apart, we will no longer have a cart.

(b) Furthermore, if we were to look for a cart elsewhere, we would never find a cart separate from its parts. If we were to take the cart completely apart, there would be no cart at all; we would be left with nothing other than the parts that once were the cart. It is useful to refer to a collection of aggregates as a thing, such as a “cart.” Nonetheless there is nothing really there that is the cart, because a “cart” is merely a functional designation or label for an arrangement of parts.

(c) Since the identity of the cart as a cart is merely an imputation with no actuality behind it, there can never be any real connection of possession between the “cartness” of the cart and its parts, so there is no actual cartness. Taking another example of a man having good qualities: if there is no man, there can be no good or bad qualities.

(d) Similarly, we can see that the parts of the cart could not be dependent on or held together by any sort of “cartness” or reality to the cart. If there were, we should be able to isolate the cartness or the true nature of the cart. Since there is no such thing to isolate, we can see that the parts that make up the whole are not dependent on any essential quality that actually is the whole thing, in this case, the cart.

(e) If we were to turn this around and say that the essential nature of the cart is dependent on the parts, we can see that if this were so, when the parts were assembled some additional factor, the essential nature of the cart, would have to appear. But this does not happen. When we put the pieces of something together, nothing new appears; there are only the pieces that are put together. So we can see that there is no essential nature dependent upon the parts.

This discussion is based on what is called in the Middle-way the “seven analyses,” which we have discussed through the example of the cart. These seven logical arguments are:

(1) There is no essential reality in a thing as a whole, just as there is no reality in a cart as a whole.
(2) There is no reality that is distinct from the sum of the parts assembled.
(3) There is no real possession of a whole by its parts, or of parts by an imagined whole, just as cartness, which does not truly exist, cannot possess parts or vice versa.
(4) There is no reality on which the parts are dependent.
(5) There is no reality dependent on the parts.
(6) There is no true self to the mere collection of parts, just as the parts of a cart randomly assembled do not constitute a cart.
There is no reality in the shape of an object when the parts are correctly assembled, just as there is no “cartness” in the shape of the cart as separate from the parts of the cart that go to make up that shape.

By applying these seven ways of examining the cart, we can see that there is no actual reality that we can say is the cart. Nonetheless, we have designated a particular collection of separate parts as a cart, and this designation is conventionally accepted and is quite functional because we can use the cart for various purposes. So, on the conventional level of reality we can recognize that a cart is a mere designation and we can say that the cart exists. On the ultimate level of reality, we know that this cart is just a label and the cart has no inherent reality as a cart.

**Seven Analyses with the Self**

These seven analyses are equally applicable to the self in relation to the mental aggregates. None of the individual aggregates are the self: First, there is no self which is distinct from the aggregates, nor is there a self between the designation of ourselves and the numerous qualities which we consider to be ours. Second, there is no self on which the various factors of our experience are based, nor is there a self which is based on the various factors of our experience. And third, there is no self in the mere composite of the aggregates, nor is there a self in the shape or structure of the aggregates as they are collected together.

So, by examining our aggregates and our experience in this way, we can see that, just as there is no true cartness to the cart, so there is no real self in ourselves. We have self-nature only in that we have arbitrarily designated ourselves as being here, as being existent. Just as we have decided for functional purposes that a group of objects put together in a certain fashion is a cart, so we have decided that the various skandhas will be known collectively as a self. But if we try to apply the seven analyses to find the self that we have designated, we will discover no reality either among or apart from this “self.”

In regard to this, the Shakyamuni Buddha said in a sutra that the feeling of one’s own self-existence is just a kind of demonic mind-form, something which has arisen without any basis in reality and which just causes us trouble. It is a view which can be held only in blatant contradiction to the way things are, namely, that in this collection of various aggregates which we experience the concept of self has no absolute reality at all; there is not even anything which can be referred to validly as “a sentient being.”

We have designated a compound as being something in itself, something in its own right, when in reality it is no more than a collection of a number of parts. Because it is convenient and useful to do so, we describe a particular group of aggregates as a sentient being, but this does not mean that any actual sentient being truly exists.

This was what Shakyamuni Buddha expressed in the example of the cart—that there is no true self-nature. Based on this assertion, Chandrakirti further expounded the teaching of non-self.
To discover if there is any reality to appearances, we must first examine the issue from two points of view: whether there is any true reality in the things themselves and whether there is any such reality apart from the things themselves. Then we should apply the seven analyses to external phenomena. This way we will see that there is no self in ordinary worldly appearances.

Still, we might feel that there must be some sort of reality behind the ordinary experiences that we undergo, the things we see, hear, and feel, just because they do actually appear. Simply because we experience them, we might assume that phenomena, at least in their component parts, must necessarily have some sort of true existence. However, the mere fact of experience does not justify us in assuming the objects of such experience are inherently real.

For example, if we look into a mirror, we see the reflection of a face, yet there is no particular reality to the face in the mirror. The image in the mirror is a mere product of conditions, in this case, the proximity of a face to the mirror and the presence of light in the room. From the conjunction of these conditions, we see a face in the mirror, yet this face is not truly existent.

Even though a face of a person is not a truly existent thing, the face in the mirror is certainly an experience; we see the face in the mirror. Similarly, when we go to sleep, we may dream frightening and terrible things or beautiful and happy things. We may have a very long dream and pass through vast periods of time, but on waking find that this dream was only a few minutes long, from an external viewpoint. Or we may go to sleep and dream for a long time, but in the experience of the dream this time might seem very short. In the dream we might see elephants and cars and planes, or visit different places, but these objects are not real things. Yet, certainly they appear and we do perceive them. The same applies to hallucinations that some people have in that they often seem to be completely real but empirically these appearances have no reality.

Thus we can see that the sheer fact that we experience an appearance does not confer valid existential status to the objects of the experience. On the other hand, neither can we deny that these appearances have any existence at all, or say that they are not there because we still experience them. To say that they are merely not there would be as absurd as to say that we experience them and therefore they must exist.

All of this is taught according to the sutras in which Buddha Shakyamuni gave examples, examples that were later expanded in *Introduction to the Middle Way* by Chandrakirti.
Chapter 5: The Insubstantiality of External Phenomena

The Four Middle-Way Analyses

Let us now turn to the “four analyses of Madhyamaka.” From our own experience we can see that things do not arise arbitrarily, but rather arise from a specific cause. The first analysis is to examine the cause or the source of something. We look for the cause of any given thing in accordance with the seven analyses previously enumerated, to see (a) if the thing comes from itself, (b) from something other than itself, (c) from something between itself and the parts which make it up, or (d) neither itself nor something other than itself. We find that there is no factor independent of interdependent arising that can be rightly designated as the specific source of any phenomenon. This is referred to as the “vajra splinter” because with this one analysis we can recognize the emptiness of everything from the great Mt. Meru right down to the smallest atom.

The second Middle-way analysis is to examine the results or outcomes of the various causes to see how they came about and what their nature or essence is. In examining the outcome of any given cause, we can see that there is no particular truly existent thing which can be designated as the effect, but neither is the effect a mere nothingness, for effects do occur. Conventionally speaking, resultant conditions appear, but from an ultimate point of view there has never been any result to any action and there are no truly existent causes. The Indian scholar, Jnanagarbha, first formulated this argument.

The third analysis of the Middle-way is examining the essential quality of phenomena to see if an external object is a single thing or many things. This analysis suggests that an essential quality of any object cannot have the nature of many things, because it would then be two different things, and not possess the unitary essential quality; nor can any object be a single thing, because it would then not be an aggregate (Skt. skandha), which are all multiple, thus making this object with a single nature unknowable.

The fourth analysis is to recognize the interdependent nature of external phenomena. This interdependent nature is similar to the idea of relativity. If we are standing on a hill, the hill we are standing on is “here” and the hill we see in the distance is the hill “over there.” But if we go over to the other hill, the hill we are then standing on is the hill “here,” and the hill we were standing on before is the hill “over there.” Similarly, things that are based on interdependence on other objects do not have an inherent nature but are always dependent on circumstances. In other words they are mental constructs such as large-small, good-bad, dark-light, etc. These are the four analyses of Madhyamaka.

The Nonexistence of Phenomena

In our conventional life the objects we experience are the result of particular causes and conditions. To say that they are simply not there is to deny something that is true, like saying that what is over there is not there. To say that phenomena do not exist at all is absurd, because we still experience them. So they cannot be totally non-existent. But according to the Buddhist view, all these phenomena exist
in a relative, conditioned fashion, based on prevailing conditions.

The Foundation schools maintain that our experience is based on the conditioned production of compounded entities. These compounds are mere designations having no reality of their own. They are made up of elements that are extremely small: the finest possible analyzable particles and the finest possible analyzable moments or units of time. According to this incomplete attitude toward emptiness, all external objects and internal thoughts are built up of small irreducible units with the help of appropriate conditions. These small real indivisible particles and real moments of time do, however, exist.

The Mind-only (Skt. Chittamatra) school of the Mahayana maintains that all experience is a projection of mind occurring as a result of previous karma. Due to the ripening of karmic seeds, we project our world, which then functions in conformity with the way it is projected, but which in itself is empty of any reality. This school holds that the external world is not real; however, the mind that perceives phenomena is real.

The Foundation tradition of Buddhism holds that small particles (atoms) and units of time are solid and real. The Mind-only tradition holds that phenomena are empty, but that the mind is inherently real. These two positions still cling to a partially false notion of some kind of self-nature of phenomena.

The Middle-way or Madhyamaka school, however, does not adhere to any concept of essential nature at all. In none of the experience of the aggregates is there anything truly real; if we examine the basic nature of reality, we cannot find anything that constitutes the essence of that reality.

But this does not imply that everything is simple nothingness. The lack of a solid reality allows for the expression of all kinds of experiences. When investigating the ultimate nature, we discover that there is no fundamental characteristic, no essential reality, no solid reality to anything, so it is said that all things are empty, that there is no true reality at all. However, emptiness is not distinguishable from the appearance of the phenomena we experience. These phenomena themselves are not separated from the ultimate nature, so our basic experience in the relative is emptiness or the lack of reality in everything.

The conventional level of reality is concerned with the way all appearances and experiences arise and the ultimate level of reality is concerned with the lack of a solid reality in everything. These two levels of reality are inseparable; they are not two different things, but rather an integrated whole. This is the basic viewpoint of Madhyamaka as expounded by Nagarjuna and it is a description of the actual viewpoint on reality of an enlightened buddha.

In approaching philosophical studies, the Tibetan masters say we should first “jump like a tiger.” This means that we should first get a general view of the situation. A tiger, when he jumps across a chasm, springs immediately and lands on the other side almost at once. So we should first get a general feeling for what the logical arguments and their conclusions are.

Then, they say, “Crawl like a turtle.” This means that we should go over all the details of each argument and try to see each specific point involved so that we can understand everything in detail, just as a turtle takes one step after another very
slowly, carefully going over each piece of terrain.

Then, they say, “Look back like a tiger seeing where he has leapt.” Having gotten a general appreciation of the arguments, and having gone over all the specific details, we should again think about how it all fits together and what the arguments are like as a whole when all details are in place.

So now we will look at these four analyses of the Middle-way in greater detail.
Chapter 6: The First Middle-Way Analysis
The Examination of Causes

I. The Examination of Causes

The first of these logical arguments is called the “vajra splinters” or sometimes “the tiny vajra.” The root text of these four analyses written by Mipham Rinpoche can be found in Appendix A. This argument is compared to a vajra because a vajra is indestructible and can cut through anything. This refers specifically to examining the source or where things come from. There are many ways to reach the realization of emptiness such as working on it gradually in stages, realizing it all at once, recognizing it by way of metaphors, and so on. Up to now this viewpoint has been described in general terms. Now we are going to approach the first analysis of the Middle-way known as “the vajra splinters” and also “refuting the notion of arising,” in a more thorough fashion. The first Middle-way analysis is to examine the causes or sources of various phenomena. In our ordinary experience we see that any given object or situation derives from something else. For instance, if we have a seed and plant it, the seed grows into a plant; if we hit our hand, we feel pain; and so on.

Now if one condition truly comes from another, we ought to be able to locate this arising or manifestation of the condition. Examining conditions in order to find the point of their arising is one method for gaining an understanding of emptiness, for we soon realize that no real arising can be found.

If a condition were to arise from another condition, there are four basic possibilities:

(a) The effect having the same nature as its cause,
(b) The effect being completely different from its originating cause,
(c) The effect being produced partly from itself and partly from a condition of a different nature, or
(d) The effect being produced neither from itself nor from anything else.

These are the fundamental alternatives of how something could arise; aside from these four propositions, there does not seem to be any other conceivable way that something might arise.

Emptiness is not an easy idea to grasp at first. Because it is complicated, we will approach the notion of emptiness from the standpoint of how effects arise from causes. We do this because phenomena certainly function according to a predictable successive pattern with one condition arising out of another. Nonetheless, the actual arising itself can never be discovered because on the ultimate level there is no reality to arise. But by a careful analysis we can gain an intellectual understanding of emptiness, which is very useful. If we have an intellectual understanding of emptiness, we can then develop faith and trust that meditation on emptiness is useful and does lead to realization.

In the practice of Mahamudra or Dzogchen meditation it is very helpful to have
an intellectual understanding of the correct view of reality, which is emptiness. Indeed, it is very difficult to meditate on emptiness directly unless such an understanding of emptiness is first developed. If we do not have an intellectual understanding of emptiness, then when we meditate, it is easy to make the mistake of taking some similar experience in our meditation as being emptiness. But if we have already developed an intellectual understanding, we will tend to not make errors in our meditation on the *dharmata* or true reality. Examining the source of particular conditions, and seeing that these conditions appear to function successively without any actuality, facilitates the growth of this understanding.

According to the Middle-way, it is necessary to understand the two truths: the conventional truth or level of reality involving appearances and the ultimate truth or level of reality concerning how phenomena really are. If we have an understanding of cause and effect, but have not an understanding of emptiness, we will still cling to a false belief of the inherent reality of external phenomena and will not attain liberation.

On the other hand, if we cling to believing that the ultimate truth of emptiness is real and ignore the conventional truth of appearance and experience, we will fall into the nihilistic view that everything is totally meaningless and that no virtuous or unvirtuous actions exist. Rather than understanding things as they actually are we will simply be denying experience, as in the previously mentioned example of believing that since there is no self, it is permissible to kill, make war, and so on, because no real person is killed. This last example of a false view does not take into account the integral nature of conventional appearances and ultimate reality and hence is called emptiness “of the mouth,” where one says that things are empty, but where there is no real insight into the ultimate nature of emptiness. The ultimate nature of emptiness does not run counter to the conventional truth and it does not interfere with the truth of the function of appearances.

**A. Something Arising from Itself**

Now we are going to examine the four possible propositions about how one condition could arise from another. The first possibility is that *something might arise from itself*. But we can see that a particular phenomenon, which is an effect of a certain cause, does not have to reoccur. The effect is already there so it does not have to duplicate itself all over again by arising from itself. This can be illustrated by the example of a child. Once a child is born, it does not have to be born again. It would be absurd to imagine that a phenomenon having once appeared, would ever need to recreate itself.

If we were to accept the proposition that something arose out of itself, we can see that this would lead to a continuous, uninterrupted process of re-becoming. If there were some necessity for anything to create itself again, just as it was, then the duplicated phenomenon would presumably have the same necessity to recreate itself again, and we would have an infinite regression with all appearances unendingly reproducing themselves over and over again. But this never happens in the real world. Things such as the seasons or the growth of
animals and plants tend to function cyclically, not in a linear fashion. But things rarely recreate themselves exactly, because if they did nothing would ever change; one condition would lead to the same condition, which would lead to the same condition throughout time.

But in fact, if we plant a seed it grows up into something different: the tree grows into a sapling, then the sapling grows into a big tree, the tree develops branches which have leaves, and eventually it produces seeds which can be planted and which can grow into more trees. Thus, one condition leads to what generally seems to be quite a different condition and eventually gets around to the first condition, and by that time it is different from the condition that preceded it. So, conditions certainly do not come from something that is just themselves; conditions do not simply repeat themselves identically.

Nonetheless, in ancient India there was a school of philosophy called the Samkhya school in which the adherents maintained that an entity could arise out of itself or reproduce itself if the cause and effect had the same nature. Even though the Samkhya philosophy is not particularly widespread today, some people might tend to arrive at these conclusions by themselves. It is therefore necessary for us to ascertain that conditions cannot arise out of sameness and simply reproduce themselves.

We can take the example of the potter's clay. The potter takes some clay, kneads it, and then puts it on his wheel. In working with it on the wheel, he transforms it into all kinds of cups, vases, pots and other clay objects. The substance itself is still the same matter or nature, being just clay, but the appearances created by the potter are quite different in the process. Or we could also take the example of a rice seed. If we plant a rice seed it will grow into a plant, go through various stages, and eventually yield a rice seed again. The Samkhya school actually used these examples to explain their viewpoint that, in accordance with these examples, although the appearance of particular phenomena might change, phenomena in cyclic relationship are all of the same nature. This, however, cannot be the case.

If we look at a rice plant and a rice seed, they seem to be quite different things. The plant is tall and green, the seed is small and pale; they have different shapes and different colors. If we were to consider that they were the same thing, we might as well think the same about other phenomena which nobody considers the same, but which resemble each other as much as a grain of rice does a rice plant—for instance, water and fire, or virtuous and unvirtuous actions. Certainly no phenomena that are so dissimilar can be exactly the same thing, or share the same essence or nature, as was asserted by the Samkhya philosophers.

Someone might ask, “Doesn’t the cyclic relationship of rice and the rice plant imply that they are somehow of the same essence or nature?” No, this is not the case. If you have a river, for instance, the river continues to flow in a cyclic relationship. Yet the water in the river is never the same; there is no water there that is the river, because the water is continually flowing down and away. A “river” is a mental construct or designation for a continuous flow, but there is no particular substance that is always there that is the river.

Even without reading commentaries and learning logic, an average farmer can
tell that a rice plant and a grain of rice could not be the same thing, that a cause and an effect could not be identical, because the cause is destroyed in order that the effect, the plant, may arise.

If we have some rice, we cannot just let the rice sit there and hope to get rice plants—we have to plant the rice. When the rice plant grows, the rice seed is eventually destroyed in the process of producing that plant. Similarly with any situation, in order to arrive at an effect, the originating cause must disappear.

So anyone who just works in the world can tell you that the cause and the result cannot be the same; the cause is always eliminated in producing the result. Even without a strong basis of logic, an ordinary working person can tell you right away that the cause and the result could not be the same thing.

B. SOMETHING ARISING FROM SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT

Let us consider the proposition that something might arise from a cause that is totally different from it, like a child being born from its mother, or a plant growing from a seed.

If we consider the flow of causes and effects in ordinary terms, it certainly seems that the effects have a nature different from their causes. We can say in ordinary terms that the effect is different from the cause, but this is so only on the conventional level. The proposition of an effect being completely different from its cause or “production from other” cannot stand the test of logic.

If the cause and its results are totally distinct from each other, then for one thing to have this relationship, the two, cause and effect, would happen together; that is, they would have to exist at the same time.

But the cause of anything always occurs prior to its effect. When the result occurs, the source has already disappeared. For instance, if you plant a seed, a plant will grow from the seed; but by the time the plant begins to grow, the seed has already been consumed. So the cause and its effect are not co-existent. We can never find both the cause and the effect existing at the same time, which shows that they are distinct from each other.

If the cause of something and its effect co-existed, then there would be no need to attribute the idea of “cause” to one of these factors at all. The effects would already be there; they would not have to come from anywhere, and so could not have been caused by whatever we might consider to be the source.

For instance, if two people are born already, there is no need for one of them to be born as the child of the other, since both of them have already been born. Similarly, if two phenomena co-exist, one cannot be the source of the other. Hence, there are no grounds for considering the result to be truly other than the source.

Furthermore, while identity might yield some consistency in relationship, if the effect were completely different from the cause there would be no consistency. That is, no cause-effect relationship could obtain between two totally disparate entities. Not only would we get a plant from seeds, we might get plants from iron or we might get darkness from a candle, and so on. Because “otherness” entails an arbitrary relationship, if results were totally other than their sources, events would arise with no particularly consistent structure whatever. Since this is not what we
observe—we observe very consistent results arising from a specific cause—the notion that results can be completely unrelated to their causes must be a fallacy.

Some people might tend to feel that this argument does not completely refute the possibility of something resulting from a cause that is totally distinct from itself. There might be some kind of purpose in the cause, which would express itself in the effect, and if so there is no specific need for an entity arbitrarily arising, even if the cause and the results are totally distinct.

This notion is fallacious. There would seem to be some sort of consistent structure to the arising or manifestation of phenomena. For example, rice does not grow from barley seeds, or from stones, or from flower seeds; it only grows from rice seeds. It would appear that there is a kind of structure to the arising of phenomena, a consistency which some would say arises out of the purpose or nature of an object.

Even so, seeds are not the same as a plant—it is beyond any doubt that they are very different things. When the seed is planted, when the cause of something occurs, the seed disappears before the effect or resultant event, like a plant, occurs. Since the cause disappears before the result occurs, there can be no actual purpose or flow. We can observe particular events in this cycle, but there is no particular nature or purpose we can see aside from the cause and effect.

This is not to deny that the cause of a particular event leads to its result consistently with respect to its ordinary mode of functioning. In the arising of various appearances it certainly seems that events occur in accordance with various sources consistently, in a linear fashion. Events function in this manner and if we examine the actual nature of the situation we will recognize that this is merely a mode of functioning; there is no actual flow of circumstance, or any purpose behind functioning that can be pointed to as a real thing. This demonstrates that, there can be a continuous cycle of cause and effect but it has no ultimate reality to it, it is of the nature of emptiness—empty of any kind of solid reality whatever.

To consider the question of purpose from another point of view, just as the seed which we plant no longer exists at the time of the growth of the plant, if a cause (the seed) had a particular purpose, that purpose could not exist at the time of the result (the plant). For example, if there were a very great silversmith who lived 600 years ago and he had the purpose of making a great necklace, and we had some silver now, there is no way that the silversmith who was alive 600 years ago had a purpose or could ever relate to our silver. There is no way, even though he may have had a great motivation to create beautiful things out of silver, that he could relate to a piece of silver that we have now, because the man who had the purpose of making the necklace died long ago. Just so, if the substance of the result and the supposed purpose involved in the source are not co-existent, no purpose could ever, in itself, produce any result. Since all causes disappear before their results occur, no notion of purpose could ever connect them. Hence the notion that there is some sort of conscious purpose connecting events is a fallacy—a mental fabrication.

To consider a further perspective on the same question of whether a cause and
effect could have a completely different nature, we might say that although the 
cause disappears before the effect occurs, this still might take place in the same 
manner where putting an object on an old fashion scale on one side cause the 
other pan to automatically go up. Similarly, we might suggest that when the cause 
disappears the result arises, with the cause disappearing as the following result 
arises. But such a proposition would not stand the test of our ordinary experience, 
for we do not find in the world a direct physical causal relationship in events, but 
only conditioned situations in which effect occur. There are a number of examples 
to illustrate this.

First, when a teacher teaches a pupil to recite something, for instance, the 
teacher’s knowledge does not leave the teacher and go to the pupil. The teacher 
does not give anything in particular to the pupil and, because they have different 
consciousnesses, the pupil’s knowledge and the teacher’s knowledge are not the 
same and do not exactly correspond to each other, as do the rising and falling of 
 pans of a scale. Yet if they were to recite exactly the same words, no difference 
between them could be discerned.

Second, if we look in a mirror, we will see our own face, although nothing 
happens to our face when we see the reflection in the mirror. Nonetheless, we see 
our face just as it is. Nothing in particular happens to our face due to this 
circumstance, the reflection is just brought about due to the conjunction of certain 
circumstances such as the position of the mirror, the presence of the face, and the 
presence of light.

Third, if we have a seal with a design on it and we stamp something with it, the 
stamp reproduced is always exactly the same as the markings on the seal. This, 
however, does not affect the seal because nothing has to come off the seal; the seal 
does not have to be destroyed in order to produce the stamp. But, due to the 
conjunction of various conditions such as the seal, the ink, the object being 
stamped, and the pressure with which it is applied, the resulting condition (the 
stamped paper) occurs without the necessity of anything happening to the seal (the 
cause).

Fourth, if we have a magnifying glass and we focus the sunlight on a piece of 
paper, we do not have to take anything out of the glass to light it. Sunlight, by 
itself, will not ignite the material, but due to the presence of particular conditions 
of the sun and the magnifying glass the paper will begin to burn.

Fifth, if we talk in an empty room or shout in a cave, we may hear an echo. The 
echo does not affect our speech and our speech remains the same. The shout may 
be no different from our speech when there was no echo, yet due to the presence 
of appropriate conditions of a room or a cave, an echo occurs.

These are examples of the fact that results or effects arise based on particular 
conditions, but the results are not necessarily physically caused by those 
conditions.

The psychological significance of this is that mind and the external objects that 
are perceived could not occur simultaneously, because cause and effect cannot 
occur simultaneously. That is, if we see a yellow object, the yellow that we see and 
the mind believing it is “yellow” could not be occurring simultaneously. Nor could
the notion of “yellow” of the external material object and the perception of yellow in the mind be the same, because these two “yellows” have different inherent natures. Rather, external objects trigger the psychological events of thinking, understanding, or recognizing. These mental perceptions thus occur based on the right secondary conditions such as it being daytime and the person has his eyes open and has good vision, but there is no direct physical cause and effect to internal perceptions which are not specifically brought about by anything external.

So if we look at ordinary circumstances, it seems as if one thing arises out of another; things seem to arise in some order. But, if we examine the mode of arising of different situations, we see that the notion of that kind of arising is a fallacy because no arising can ever be discovered in the examples of mirror, stamp, or echo.

The idea that conditions arise out of something else is just a very general principle that more or less applies if we take a functional view. But if we examine carefully to find out where exactly this arising is, there is no specific kind of arising to be discovered. So in practicing the path, it is said that we must collect vast amounts of merit to reach realization. However, if we were to examine the path as to whether it is necessary to collect a great deal of merit, we could not specifically find the relationship between the collection of merit and realization. Because all phenomena are essentially empty of any substantiality, even the collection of merit is just an ordinary notion.

Also on close examination, we find there is no arising of external appearances. If appearances have no arising, they can also have no resting and there is nothing actually annihilated when they disappear. The notion that things arise, and rest there, and disappear again is fundamentally absurd.

These two facts—that all appearances arise in our field of experience and also appear to be actually there, and that on the ultimate level there is no arising, no resting, and no passing away of appearances—are not contrary. It is much like the example of dreams. If we were to go to sleep and dream of an elephant, this dream would have been brought about by various conditions and the elephant would have seemed real to us. However, if upon waking, we were to ask, “Now, where is the elephant I just dreamed about?” or “Where are the parents of the elephant I dreamed about?” it would be absurd. It would be meaningless because no actual elephant existed. We experienced seeing an elephant in the dream due to particular conditions of sleeping, and the elephant wasn’t there in the conditions of waking.

Similarly, all phenomena occur due to particular conditions involved in appearances. When they seem to arise, they do so without any real arising or any real abiding or any real passing away, but arise as a mere appearance because there is no solid reality that can ever be discerned.

By examining appearances in this fashion, we can see that all phenomena, that is all that appears, are devoid of any essential quality of their own and have no inherent reality. They do not come from themselves or from anything identical to themselves or from anything distinct from themselves. There is no way in which
any essential reality can be attributed to anything at all. This is the teaching on the arising of phenomena out of something completely distinct from themselves.

C. SOMETHING ARISING BOTH FROM ITSELF AND FROM SOMETHING ELSE

Let us consider the possibility that an effect occurs due to both a cause identical to the thing itself and also a cause due to something completely different from the thing itself.

Having already considered a cause identical to the effect does not exist and a cause completely different from the effect does not exist, these two events might occur together to make a different outcome. This, however, could not be the case because the cause which was identical would be subject to the arguments against something arising from itself and the cause which was different would be subject to the arguments refuting the idea that something could arise from a cause totally different from itself. Such a position would have the flaws of both previous wrong views.

D. SOMETHING ARISING FROM NO CAUSE

The fourth alternative that we are going to consider in this first analysis of examining the arising of phenomena is the possibility that phenomena arise neither from themselves nor from something different, in other words, arise from no cause whatever. This view was asserted by the Carvaka school of ancient India. According to this school, phenomena occur simply according to their own natures, with no particular cause and no particular result. Since there is no cause and no effect, there would be no such things as virtuous and unvirtuous actions that would lead to favorable or unfavorable circumstances.

The Carvakas, who held views similar to the hedonists in ancient Greece, gave a number of examples to illustrate this view. For instance, they said that when it rains, mushrooms grow. We cannot find the source for the mushrooms, but whenever it rains, mushrooms grow. The Carvakas give this as one example of there being no cause or effect. They maintained, for example, that the wind blows the dust everywhere, so there is no result to this action. In other words, they maintain that when the cause (the wind) hits the dust, the dust is dispersed anywhere with no particular order or effect.

They further said that things merely obey their own innate nature. For instance, a seed is round and since no one has made the seed round, it is round due simply to its own nature. Similarly, a thorn is sharp due to its sharp essence; the thorn did not come from any external or internal cause, it is just the way it is. Similarly, they said that no one had to paint the peacock, nor did the peacock have to develop its own colors, but, merely according to the nature of the peacock, it has its distinctive coloring.

The Carvakas also said the sun rises in the east in the morning and no one has to pull it up; the Ganges flows to the sea and no one has to pull it down. Everything just obeys its own nature; so there is no cause for anything and there are no results of anything; with everything being arbitrary. These views of the Carvakas lead to their notion that the arising of all phenomena is completely arbitrary and has no
cause or reason.

The Carvakas explained, for example, that merely the physical union of male and female factors at conception causes the appearance of a mind in a human. Just as if we put grain and yeast together, we will automatically get something that has the potential to make someone drunk. Similarly, when there is the union of the two physical factors at the time of conception, a consciousness automatically develops.

The Carvakas gave a further example of an old, very poor beggar who decided that he wanted to become rich. He went into the forest and found the paw of a dead wolf and made many footprints on the road with the wolf’s paw. Then he called a large group of villagers around and said that he had seen a wolf demon in the area and it had left tracks on the road. The beggar then said that he was going to get rid of the demon in seven days. The people were to put all of their food and belongings outside and then go inside and lock their doors. On the seventh day the beggar did his ceremony, the people went inside, put everything outside and locked their doors. The beggar then stole everything and became rich.

The Carvakas said, “The Buddha is much like this. In order to become famous and well known, he has preached a doctrine that made him famous and well known, though it does not have much merit. Actually, there is no previous lifetime and no future lifetimes. The Buddha claims that he sees such things, but he has preached this doctrine just to aggrandize himself.”

The Carvakas, obviously, didn’t like the Shakyamuni Buddha very much. They maintained that everything ends; when we die, the body dissolves into the four elements and the mind just vanishes. So the correct thing to do with this life is to do whatever we want to do; whatever makes us happy. The Carvakas also had “the one analysis” that proves everything. This analysis proved there could be no previous life because we cannot see it and there could be no future life because we cannot see it and there could be no hell because we cannot see it and there could be no pure realms because we cannot see it. In other words the “one analysis” of the Carvakas was simply if you cannot see it, it doesn’t exist.

According to Buddhism, however, this is a totally unacceptable view. In Buddhist thinking, everything has to originate from some kind of cause, that is, everything has to come from some previous condition. For anything to occur there must be a basic causal condition and appropriate secondary conditions. For example, if in summer there are seeds in the ground (the cause) and there is rain, rich soil, and warm conditions (secondary conditions), plants will grow (the effect or result). In the winter, even though there may be seeds in the ground, there are no appropriate secondary conditions and the seeds will not grow. In a more immediate example, on the table in front of me there are no plants growing because there are no causal conditions of a seed being present or any appropriate secondary conditions of soil, water, etc. on the table. There being neither a cause nor secondary causal conditions nothing will occur.

The common observation of the consistency of phenomena can show that there must be some causal condition and secondary conditions involved in bringing about events. For instance, in the pot on the windowsill there are flowers growing.
This is because seeds were planted in the pot and they were watered. No flowers grew on the table where there were no seeds, no soil, and no water. If everything arose arbitrarily, it would do so in no particular order. There would be no more reason for flowers to grow out of flower seeds in a pot than there would for flowers to grow out of a piece of wood with no soil. Since the seeds would not be a necessary condition for the growth of plants if everything were arbitrary, whether or not there were seeds would make no difference to whether or not there were plants. This is absurd.

As for the question of previous lives, we can see that our mind goes on in a continuum based on thoughts or mental appearances. We have present mind forms based on the thoughts we had yesterday, the day before, a week ago, and so on. Mind is a continuous flow like a river. Furthermore, each person experiences his own mind, his own thoughts, as a continuum. We never seem to suddenly experience a new mind, or another mind; rather, we experience the same continuum of mind.

If we trace this back, we can see that when we were born our mind was already there as a continuum which had come from the period in the womb. Since we do not see any disjunction in this continuous flow of mind, where did the mind come from at the moment of conception? If it had suddenly appeared at that point, it would deny our whole experience in life, so it must have come from a previous life. If you plant a seed, a sprout grows. The seed came from a similar plant, which came from a seed, which came from a plant, etc. No seed spontaneously occurs without a plant being part of a continuum. Not even mushrooms occur spontaneously; they come from spores. Without spores, there would be no mushrooms. So our mind had to come from somewhere.

As for future lives, we can see that if there is a cause it will eventually produce a result. Take the mind, for example. We have a mind today and need not fear that there will be no mind tomorrow. We know from experience that having a mind today means that there will be a mind tomorrow and the next day and the day after that. The mind is not in danger of suddenly disappearing for no reason.

Or take the example of a candle. If the candle is lit, it burns. Its light will not just disappear for no reason; having been lit, it will continue to burn. Similarly, since mind continues in an endless continuum, when we die we will certainly continue to have a mind. Since mind inevitably yields a result, that mind will give rise to another mind, which will continue beyond the moment of death. We can thus see that the mind continues after death, so there must be some kind of future lifetime.

The Carvakas’ “one analysis” is not particularly convincing. The mere fact that something is not seen does not prove its non-existence. If this were the case, a blind man could rightly say, “I do not see anything at all, therefore nothing exists.” If we accept this line of reasoning we deny the validity of inference. Using that logic if we have not seen our heart, lungs and other internal organs they must not exist. Conversely, if we maintain that, although we cannot directly see the lungs and heart, we can see our body and the body depends on the existence of the lungs and a heart. So we can infer we have a heart and lungs even if we have not visually seen them. This is the same line of reasoning used to demonstrate the
existence of past and future lives. If we accept the validity of this line of reasoning, we must accept the existence of past and future lives.

Logically examining the possibility of past and future lives to gain an intellectual appreciation of the continuum from lifetime to lifetime is analogous to the case of a traveling businessman. When a businessman goes to another country with his goods, he is not particularly concerned with the country in which he finds himself. He is there to sell his goods. He looks for new kinds of goods to take back to his home country. He does not think much about his welfare in the foreign country because he plans a speedy return home. Similarly, by gaining an intellectual appreciation of the continuum of lifetime to lifetime, we develop a feeling, much like that of the businessman in another land, that we are here on a temporary visit and will soon be moving on to the next lifetime. In other words, we have a feeling that this lifetime is in no way permanent. By gaining this perspective, we considerably reduce our attachments to this life and this is quite beneficial.

**SUMMARY**

We have now presented refutations for the four possible causes of phenomena arising: (a) phenomena arise from themselves or something of identical nature, (b) phenomena arise from something completely different from their nature, (c) phenomena arise partly from themselves and partly from something with a different nature, (d) phenomena arise neither from themselves nor from something of a different nature (that is, arising without any cause).

We can thus see that there is no way for anything to arise: nonetheless, things continue to appear. That is, on the conventional level of reality things arise or appear due to a primary cause and the necessary secondary conditions necessary for that event to come to fruition. If we examine how anything arises or appears in our consciousness, it becomes obvious that this arising is an absurdity and that all appearances of phenomena are empty having no inherent reality of its own.

In the ultimate sense if there is no way for anything to arise, it follows that there is no way for anything to stay, to abide. There is nothing actually there, nor is there anything that can pass away. In the Buddhist commentaries this is called “the horns of a rabbit.” Rabbits have no horns. If rabbits have no horns, the length of time for horns to grow on a rabbit is meaningless, as is any talk about a rabbit losing his horns. According to this example, we can see that since there is no way for things to arise on the ultimate level, there can be no abiding or passing away of phenomena. All appearances are mere appearances like images in a dream that occur but have no solid reality in themselves.

Just as there is no abiding of phenomena, then neither can there be an arising of phenomena, nor can there be a ceasing of phenomena. On the ultimate level everything is totally beyond any conception whatever. This is what is meant by saying that everything is of the nature of emptiness; in other words, it is beyond any kind of conception.

This argument was presented in a very brief form in Treatise on the Middle Way by Nagarjuna and was later expanded upon and presented in great detail by
Chandrakirti in his Introduction to the Middle Way. The discussion presented here is an abridgment of Chandrakirti’s arguments.

Questions

Question: In the example of the traveling businessman, what is analogous to the homeland?

Rinpoche: The future lifetime is what corresponds to the homeland. If a businessman were to go a foreign land and not concern himself with his business affairs but just have a good time, he would spend all his money. When he got back to his own country, he would have neither his original capital nor goods for sale and would become poor and have a very difficult time. If we do not concern ourselves with our future lives in this present lifetime, we will find ourselves in very unfavorable circumstances later on.

Question: Which came first, the flower or the seed?

Rinpoche: I have also heard the question, “Which came first, the chicken or the egg?” In all my reading I’ve never found any answer to which came first. But certainly for a very long time, chickens have been born from eggs and chickens have laid eggs and flowers have grown from seeds and flowers have given rise to seeds. In general, cyclic existence or samsara is infinite, having no beginning, so there is no beginning to any particular succession of phenomena. No matter what phenomenon we examine we can see that it came from some cause. If we examine that cause we find that it came from another cause. No matter what we examine we find this unending series of causes and effects. Therefore, there is no first cause.

Whether or not there is an end to cyclic existence depends on what point of view we consider it from. If we think of ordinary experiences in cyclic existence, the ordinary samsaric world, it is quite impossible to think of an end to cyclic existence. For there to be an end to cyclic existence totally, we would have to bring all sentient beings to full realization, which is very difficult. But, in terms of our own personal lives, there is a potential of ending cyclic existence with the realization of buddhahood. If we have a rice seed, the seed came from a rice plant, which came from a seed, which came from a plant, which came from a seed, in an unending succession stretching back through a long period of time. If we take that seed and burn it, its potential to produce a plant is destroyed.

Question: Isn’t there some problem of duality there with a mind that goes on and on and a body that stops?

Rinpoche: It’s not really a problem, because it’s not a question of the body being annihilated but only of the connection between body and mind being broken. When the body is left behind, the mind continues on to a future lifetime with the body being left behind as mere matter. It may be burned, but even so there remain ashes. Those ashes can be scattered on the ground and will continue as a physical phenomenon.
Question: Then mind and body are of different categories?

Rinpoche: Yes. The body is perceptible in ordinary physical terms—we can feel it, touch it, and so on. Mind is not physically perceptible. At the moment, body and mind are occurring simultaneously, but they are, even now, quite distinct.

Question: When and how does the mind go from a dead body to a new one? Is it at the moment of conception?

Rinpoche: What usually happens is that the body is afflicted with some kind of disease so that the mind can no longer remain attached to it. So the mind leaves the body and death occurs. The body deteriorates. Then, sometimes very quickly and sometimes after a short period of time, the mind perceives another body, identifies with that body as “this is my body” and thus forms an attachment to the body. That relationship of attachment is the sense in which the mind and body are connected.

According to the scriptures, semen cannot enter an ovum unless there is also an attaching mind present, that is, a mind is a necessary condition for impregnation. So it would seem logical that at the moment of conception, when the semen enters the ovum, the mind becomes attached to that physical form. From the moment of conception, the being is alive.

Question: That sounds as though the mind is choosing the body.

Rinpoche: In fact, there is no choice involved. When the mind becomes separated from a body, the visions that appear to it are extremely disturbing and erratic and, due to the disturbance and confusion caused by these appearances, the mind has virtually no possibility to make any kind of choice.

Question: Since there is one mind to one body and the world population is increasing all the time, does this mean that certain animals with good karma are taking higher rebirth and beings from other planets or world systems are taking rebirth in our plane of existence?

Rinpoche: My opinion on the matter is that nowadays the number of desire objects in our world has increased greatly as compared with the past, but in spite of this the general level of happiness of sentient beings seems to be declining rapidly. Since the happiness of our world is declining, it is much easier in karmic terms to be reborn in our world.

In ancient times, although there were very few kinds of desirable material objects, it is said that beings were quite happy. So it would seem that, if the quality of being were generally higher in the world, it would be harder to gain rebirth here and there would therefore be fewer beings in the world due to it being harder to get into. In fact, in ancient times, when beings were happier, there were far fewer people. Now, when people are much more unhappy, there are more of them.

Question: So where are the reincarnated lamas (Tib. tulkus) coming from?

Rinpoche: Do you think they are new ones? Sentient beings go from one birth to
another, from one realm to another. Some humans die and are reborn as animals or in other, distant human realms. Some animals die and are reborn as humans. If you catch a fly in a vase and stop up the top, the fly will keep flying around in the vase. It will fly up to the top, down to the bottom, around in the middle and keep on moving—it’s exact position will fluctuate greatly. Just so, sentient beings wander from one realm to another, from the highest realms to the lowest, but as long as they are caught in cyclic existence, they continue to move around. So the Shakyamuni Buddha referred to sentient beings as “movers,” because they go from one condition to another. They are never in the same condition, they just keep on moving.

**Question:** But the Buddha also said that the highest rebirth we can take is as a man or woman because only from the human state can we reach enlightenment. So the fact that the world population is increasing would seem to indicate that more and more sentient beings are accumulating the merit to come back as men and women.

**Rinpoche:** The Shakyamuni Buddha referred to the precious human rebirth as the most favorable state of incarnation. Mere possession of a human body does not constitute precious human rebirth.

The extremely favorable kind of rebirth that the Buddha meant was not merely a human body, but a human body with the potential to practice Dharma. It is the potential to practice Dharma that is difficult to obtain and very precious. Not every human birth is a precious human rebirth, because there are a huge number of people who are born human, but who have no connection with the Dharma. The increase in the number of humans who have no potential to practice Dharma is no sign of increasing merit at all.

**Question:** But more and more lamas are going to the West and more and more people are coming to Dharma.

**Rinpoche:** Possibly the general Dharma is increasing, but the Dharma of realization, the spread of people actually attaining realization, is certainly not. In the time of the Shakyamuni Buddha, there were 500 arhats in one small area. Now, in any area, try to find even one arhat.

**Question:** From a spiritual point of view, is family planning right or wrong?

**Rinpoche:** I have no fixed opinion on the matter. All details of karma are perceptible only to the Buddha. Personally, I see no great fault in preventing conception. But, of course, once conception has occurred, to kill the fetus would be to destroy a sentient being, to commit an act of killing, and would be an unvirtuous action. But I cannot see much non-virtue in the prevention of conception.

**Question:** But don’t you prevent a mind from taking rebirth?

**Rinpoche:** Is it then unvirtuous to be a nun? For instance, a woman who could have had five children but by becoming a nun before she had any children she would have prevented five beings from taking human rebirth. Would that be an
unvirtuous action?

Question: Maybe that is why the Buddha was reluctant to allow the ordination of women to begin with and said that the Dharma would disappear 500 years earlier because the order of Nuns was formed.

Rinpoche: The Shakyamuni Buddha said that if women were not permitted to take ordination the Dharma would last longer, but that if women were ordained, although the Dharma would not last as long, it would be much more widespread.
The Twenty Types of Emptinesses
(Tib. tong pa nyi shu)

1. Emptiness of internal phenomena
2. Emptiness of external phenomena
3. Emptiness of internal and external phenomena
4. Emptiness of emptiness
5. Emptiness of the great
6. Emptiness of ultimate phenomena
7. Emptiness of compounded phenomena
8. Emptiness of uncompounded phenomena
9. Emptiness that is beyond extremes
10. Emptiness of that which has no beginning or end
11. Emptiness of that which is not to be abandoned
12. Emptiness of nature or essence (Tib. rang dzin)
13. Emptiness of all phenomena
14. Emptiness of individual characteristics
15. Emptiness of what can’t be perceived
16. Emptiness of the lack of truly existent identity
17. Emptiness of a thing
18. Emptiness of a lack of a thing
19. Emptiness of inherent nature
20. Emptiness of other nature
In these teachings we are discussing the Madhyamaka or the Middle-way, also known as “the true nature of reality.” This Middle-way is sometimes referred to as the Prajnaparamita or “mother of all the Buddhas,” because it is the sole basis for realization. Only with true insight into the transcendent nature of the Prajnaparamita, which is the Middle-way view, can freedom from samsara be obtained and nirvana be realized.

The Middle-way view of Prajnaparamita is the cause, “the mother,” of all the Buddhas. To understand this view and gain some appreciation for it, we have been looking at the four analyses of emptiness taught by the ancient panditas of India. We have already discussed the examination of the first analysis of the cause of phenomena according to the teachings of Chandrakirti. Now let us consider the second analysis of results according to the teachings of Jnanagarbha.

In general, we should never feel that in gaining insight into emptiness, the ultimate nature of reality, we are going to reach a mere nothingness, in which there is no karma, no appearance, no thing at all. Such a nothingness does not exist. Having examined the arising of phenomena, we should conclude not that phenomena do not arise at all, but rather that there is no solid real thing arising.

This is quite relevant to the theory of karma, for if there were a solid objective reality to the arising of phenomena rather than emptiness, karma would be impossible. This is because if a particular cause were present, the result would have to be produced automatically. With the result having to be produced automatically, there would be no way for a cause to produce a long-term result, for instance, in future lives. So the principle of emptiness does not refute the law of karma, but supports it. When we gain insight into the true nature, the way phenomena really are, we do not abandon the law of karma, but rather gain a great deal of trust in the law of karma because it is supported by emptiness.

Take the example of looking into a mirror. If something real had to pass from your face to the mirror, if your real face had to enter a mirror before you could see the reflection, reflections in mirrors would not be possible. However, given the appropriate conditions, reflections arise with there being no substantial connection between cause (your face) and effect (the reflection).

Because of this empty quality of the connection between the cause, the secondary conditions, and the effect for us it is possible to create karma in this lifetime and to experience its fruition at some remote time such as in another lifetime.

Let us now examine the four possible resultant conditions which are the effects of cause-and-effect from the four-fold logic of the Middle-way: (a) the effects already exist when the phenomena arise, or (b) the effects do not exist when the phenomena arise, or (c) the effects both exist and do not exist when the phenomena arise, or (d) the effects neither exist nor do not exist when the phenomena arise.
A. The Effects Already Exist When the Phenomena Arise

It is obvious that resultant conditions could not exist at the point of arising, for if they did, they would have to exist prior to their causes and we would see something quite different from our ordinary experience. For instance, if this were true, the mature head of rice would have to be there before it came to fruition because having inherent existence, it would already have been there before it arose. Furthermore, if what existed had still to recur, then any existent thing would have to occur in the same form again and again. Since we do not perceive such a state of affairs in the real world, we can see that results could not be existent at the point of their arising.

B. The Effects Do Not Exist When the Phenomena Arise

If the results were non-existent at the point of their arising, they would be like horns of a rabbit. But things that are nonexistent never occur. For instance, the horns of a rabbit or the son of a barren woman obviously do not occur. So if resultant conditions were non-existent at the point of their arising, they would never occur.

The argument that prior to the occurrence of a particular effect, there was a non-existence of that effect which then is transformed into existence at the point of arising can be refuted by reference to the mutual exclusiveness of being and nothingness. There is no way for something that does not exist to suddenly transmute into existence, for appearances do not occur without a cause out of nothing at all. Rather they appear in dependence on previous conditions and causes. The notion that whatever obviously did not exist has come into existence is a mere intellectual construct, a projection about a particular situation having no genuine reality. For instance, it is incorrect to say that before planting there was no grain in the field and now the grain is growing there that this demonstrates something coming out of nothing. The notion of a consistent time sequence to events and the idea that the field now is the same as the previously empty field, is merely our own designation of the situation with there being no actual connection between the two.

Similarly, there is no way for something to exist and later to pass into nothingness. Both of these viewpoints of existence coming from nothingness and existence going into nothingness are fallacious because in real life one thing always follows another based on the right conditions. In ordinary terms it certainly seems to be true, yet it is just something we impute to circumstances and there is no reality to it at all. Actually there is no way for existence to pass into nothingness, or for nothingness to suddenly produce existence.

I am now forty-five. In ordinary terms, I think that I am the same person who was born forty-five years ago. However, if I examine the situation, it seems absurd to think that I could be the same person I was forty years ago at the age of five. That person forty years ago was quite small; I am much, much bigger. Forty years ago I looked different, acted differently, thought differently, in fact, there is no noticeable identity I can find to justify saying that I am the same individual who was there forty years ago. If we want to connect two such dissimilar phenomena,
we might as well connect the whole of samsara and say that everything is just the same, that it is all one.

Any notion of things arising out of nothingness, or passing into nothingness, is just a *post factum* judgment. That is, in observing a particular, previously unnoticed phenomenon we imagine that it has newly come to be or we fail to observe a previously noticed phenomenon and we suppose that it has ceased to be. This is merely a mental construct with no actual reality behind it. There is no arising of phenomena or passing away of phenomena and there is no abiding of or lack of abiding of appearances; there is no self-nature or lack of self-nature in phenomena. Everything that appears is mere appearance with no essence at all.

In the final analysis there is nothing that can be said about phenomena. We cannot validly indicate any arising, any passing away, any coming, any going, any increase, any recognition, or any obscuration of anything. Everything that appears is mere appearance without further identifiable characteristics.

If it is argued that unless conditions which already exist or non-existent conditions can occur, there would be no appearances at all, this is also not so. All appearances and all resultant conditions are illusory with no nature of their own, based on previous conditions that were equally illusory. This continuum of occurring appearances is unerring in so far as nothing ever occurs from outside of it; everything always occurs within this illusory structure of successive causes and conditions. If we examine the details of these conditions, we will find that they possess no solid reality that we can isolate or discover—they all have the same nature as hallucinations.

**C. The Effects Both Exist and Do Not Exist When the Phenomena Arise**

If there is no arising of either resultant conditions that already exist or of resultant conditions that do not exist, there can be no arising of conditions that both exist and do not exist since both terms of such a proposition have already been refuted.

**D. The Effects Neither Exist nor Do Not Exist When the Phenomena Arise**

Similarly, the proposition that resultant conditions neither exist nor do not exist is an absurd alternative, for there is no situation that we can describe as “neither existence nor non-existence.” This is only a verbal possibility and this corresponds to nothing that is actually real. Thus everything that occurs is totally beyond any conception, beyond any possibility of intellectual description.

It might seem that this denial of existence, non-existence, both and neither, this denial of the ultimate validity of any proposition or concept whatsoever, is merely another variety of the final alternative, in which both being and nothingness have been denied at once—but this is not so.

**Summary**

In order to develop an intellectual appreciation of emptiness, the discussion has been arranged in this four-fold fashion. First, because most people feel that things exist, the arguments showing that there is no existent quality to resultant
appearances are presented. Since these arguments tend to lead people to feel that results do not exist at all, the refutation of total non-existence is the next argument put forward. Then, because this argument tends to persuade people that conditions neither exist nor do not exist, the argument that refutes such a position is propounded.

This analysis enables us to gain an intellectual appreciation of emptiness and a recognition that this emptiness is not an absolute nothingness, a void. Also, this complete voidness is not the kind of emptiness in the practice of meditation leading us to the condition beyond mind in which the true nature of reality is actually recognized. For this realization the mind must first be pacified using shamatha meditation. Then, in the recognition of fundamental awareness—fundamental emptiness—non-discriminating wisdom arises as a brilliant light in which the world of appearances is recognized. With non-discriminating wisdom we do not perceive phenomena as dualistic subject and object, but rather in a nondualistic, intuitive cognition.
Chapter 8: The Third Middle-Way Analysis
Finding the Essential Nature of One and Many

Let us now discuss the third Middle-way analysis found in the classical Indian commentaries on emptiness. Shantarakshita, a great Indian scholar and yogi who through his practice is said to have attained the ability to extended his life to the age of 999 years old developed this perspective. During his long life he composed many commentaries on Buddhist philosophy and various sutras with his most famous work being the Ornament to the Middle Way.

In the eighth century CE Padmasambhava introduced the teachings of the tantra into Tibet. The sutra teachings were disseminated somewhat earlier in Tibet, primarily by Shantarakshita, who came and ordained the first monks in Tibet. This third Madhyamaka analysis of Shantarakshita, which we are going to discuss, is the examination of the essential nature of phenomena.

This method of Shantarakshita is the easiest way to understand emptiness because there is only one thing to understand—are things single or multiple? From this analysis we can understand the emptiness of everything—the emptiness of mind, the emptiness of phenomena, and the emptiness of the connection between mind and phenomena.

For this reason Mipham Rinpoche, the great Nyingma scholar, in his commentary to the Ornament to the Middle Way said that Shantarakshita's single analysis is like the thunderbolt of Indra, which he could hurl to earth destroying whole cities.

Are Phenomena Single or Multiple

Shantarakshita's analysis begins by examining the essential quality or nature (Skt. svabhava) of phenomena to see if phenomena have the nature of being a single entity or the nature of being an entity that is more than one. Nothing can be simultaneously unitary and multiple. Also, if there were any essential quality at all, to say that it was neither single nor multiple would be to deny the very essential quality that we were trying to affirm. Such a proposition would be self-contradictory. There are only two possibilities: that any essential quality either be single or be multiple.

In looking for this essential quality of all compounded and uncompounded things, we can see that multiple is based on units. We cannot have many things unless we first have one. A number of things is always composed of a number of single things and it follows that unless there were first one, then there could be not be many. So we will examine the question of whether or not there is a unitary, essential reality to everything.

In general, experience consists of external appearances and subjective internal experiences of mind. First, when we consider external appearances, we can see that no appearances have a unitary nature. If we look at a mountain or hill, it appears to us to be a single entity, but it actually is a collection of trees, shrubs, rocks, and earth. Or we can examine something like a vase. A vase has a base and a neck and an opening, so the notion that a vase is just a vase or that a hill is just a
hill, is basically a false intellectual conception. Or take the example of an elephant. While we might say there is a single elephant, if we look at the elephant we see it has feet, a trunk, a torso and a head, and so on. So we see the various parts of the elephant, but no particular single quality or part is the elephant itself. Thus everything that appears as a single object to us conceptually, when carefully analyzed, is really a compound made of many elements.

In the same way, nothing that we designate as a single thing, such as a memory, a chair or a vase is in reality a single unitary thing at all but is made up of many different single objects. Even our own bodies are composed of separable parts; under analysis no single quality by which the whole can be identified is ever found.

In short, we can see that all phenomena are compounds; there is no unitary essential quality to anything. Everything we experience, all that appears, is analyzable into smaller and smaller parts. The designation “single unit” is merely a convenient mental label for what is, in fact, a collection of parts, of particles. This demonstrates what we call the emptiness of outer phenomena because all objects are actually a mental designation, not a real solid object.

Even if we examine outer and inner phenomena in terms of tiny indivisible particles, we find they are not truly indivisible or unitary. As Vasubandhu said in his *Compendium of Knowledge*, if compounds are composed of tiny particles that we call atoms, then these particles must relate to other particles in such a manner as to build up compounds. In relating to other particles, they must do so in terms of directions. That is, each particle would have another particle to the east of it, to the west of it, to the north, and to the south, as well as having a particle above it and below it. By relating to a number of other individual particles, any given particle would be showing more than a single characteristic because it would have an eastness, westness, northness, southness, and so on revealing its own compound nature. Therefore, it could not itself be an indivisible, unitary particle. Thus, the notion of unitary, indivisible particles as the building blocks of the world is a fallacy.

Alternatively, we could propose that these smallest particles have no quality of directionality, but connect with only one other particle in a total relationship. However, by examining how this would play out we can see that this too could not be the case. If two particles were interconnected in such an integral fashion, one particle would have to exactly pervade the space of the other; for if it did not, this would show the two particles were of a compound nature. A third particle would also have to pervade exactly the original particle, and so on with all the particles in samsara. Thus, the totality of existence would be subsumed in one particle. Such a particle would include more particles, but would get no bigger because the particles would take up the same space. It could not serve as a basis for the building up of compounds; it would not show the multiplicity of characteristics observable in our world.

So, in examining objective appearance in this way, it becomes obvious that there is no essential quality to any of it. There being no essential quality in any of the appearances which nonetheless occur, we may conclude that all is emptiness.
Now turning to internal phenomena, the nature of the mind, we all tend to feel that we have a single, real mind that experiences and recognizes things. But if we examine the experience of mind, we see that there is not a single thing that is the mind we are said to have. Consciousness has many different components, from awareness of visual objects (forms, shapes and colors) to awareness of sounds, tactile consciousness, taste consciousness, and mental consciousness, and these are all separate parts or functions of the mind. Each type of consciousness recognizes a particular field of experience. Thus each of these six consciousnesses functions in a somewhat independent way from the others. So the mind too is not a single, unitary thing, but a compound object, just as all external objects are compounds.

It is sometimes said that there are eight consciousnesses: the five sensory consciousnesses, the mental consciousnesses, the klesha consciousness, and the ground consciousness (Skt. alaya-vijnana). From these all appearances and mind forms arise. The klesha consciousness, which clings to the notion of ego or “I,” and the ground consciousness, which stores information from the other six consciousnesses, are sometimes held to be independent modes of consciousness. For our purposes though, it is much easier to posit just six consciousnesses.

More specifically, we can see that visual consciousness, for instance, has the potential to perceive various objects. For instance, if we look at a piece of yellow cloth, we see yellow; if we look at a snowy mountain we see white. We also experience the objects of visual awareness in succession, seeing first one thing and then another, and so on, with prior appearances disappearing at the moment the succeeding appearances occur. Thus visual consciousness is multiple and successive and has many different potential objects; so it cannot be a single, unitary thing.

Examining the successive manner in which consciousness perceives objects, we might be led to believe that each “flash” of awareness, each moment of consciousness, is a fundamental unit of time, comparable to the indivisible particles of matter already discussed. However, if we could ever isolate such a single unit of time, we would see that it could only occur within a framework of ongoing consciousness because awareness is never static, and hence each moment would have to relate to a previous moment and a future moment. That is, such a moment would not be an inseparable whole but rather would consist of three parts: the parts relating to a previous moment, the present moment, and the future moment; with “present” being “past” in relation to the future moment.

So there is no unitary, essential quality, no single identifiable reality, in either the external world that appears to us or in the subjective mind. Finally, there is no reality in activity or functioning. If we decide to go to Kathmandu, for example, we might think that the activity of going, the function we would be performing by going, has some essential reality of its own. Or if rain falls, we might feel that, although there is really no rain as such, because what we call rain is only innumerable drops, yet there is a reality to the activity of the rain which is the falling of the rain. However, this is not the case, for there is no valid way to isolate and designate as real any function or activity. That is to say, the falling of the rain cannot be isolated from the rain itself, nor can going to Kathmandu be separated
or isolated into the individual going and Kathmandu. These activities are actually only small changes in the mode of being of a particular compound agent and not separate things at all. Therefore, an activity cannot be isolated and identified as a unitary thing.

Finally, we might decide that some uncompounded entity like space has a fundamentally real, inherent existence. Space is not a compound, it does not consist of different parts and so we might very well imagine it to have some sort of essential quality. But in actuality no uncompounded entity exists in and of itself, not even as a mere appearance. If we make a square with our fingers, we might refer to a square space, but in fact, there is no square space there at all. We simply fail to recognize our hands for the moment and suddenly think we see a square space there. But space is not a thing in itself; it merely seems to occur as the negation of particular appearances, in this case our hands. Similarly, the space in a room seems to appear real but when we negate the appearance of the walls there is no separate thing that is this space.

Thus we can conclude from the foregoing analysis that there is no way there can be any particular single real nature or essential quality to anything. And if there is no single real nature, there also could not be any multiple real nature, because multiplicity is based on single units. If there is no single unit there can be no multiple. These being the only possible alternative modes in which a real nature or quality might exist, we can see from this one method of examination that there is no self in any appearance, no self in any dharma, no essential nature to anything at all.

This concludes the discussion of the third analysis of Madhyamaka, an examination to find the essential quality according to the Ornament of the Middle Way of Shantarakshita.
Chapter 9: The Fourth Middle-Way Analysis
The Examination of All Sources

The fourth analysis of Madhyamaka is the examination of phenomena following Nagarjuna’s Treatise on the Middle Way. In this analysis we examine sources, results, and the true nature in a procedure developed as a whole.

First, we can see that all phenomena or occurring events do not arise out of an inherent true nature, but rather arise from a cause and secondary conditions that permit this cause to yield a particular effect. Nowhere in our field of experience do we meet arbitrarily occurring events or phenomena without a cause. Phenomena have no discoverable essence or real nature, but appear due to causes and conditions without any solid reality, like reflections in a mirror. Phenomena, having no solid real nature, are not eternal; but neither are they merely nothing. They do not come from anywhere, nor do they go anywhere. There is no real arising of them, nor is there any actual passing away of them. They do not exist independently, but occur interrelated due to the presence of sources and appropriate conditions. Thus all phenomenal occurrences are beyond any possible conception.

An example of the arising of phenomena often given is a reflection of a statue of Vajradhara in a mirror. If we examine the image of Vajradhara in a mirror, we can see that there is no real thing in the mirror, yet it really appears to be there and so it is not a mere nothingness. The reflection does not come from anywhere in particular; if we turn the mirror over, there is nowhere it has gone. We cannot observe any real appearance arising in its occurrence or any genuine passing away in its disappearance. No independent solid reality can be ascribed to the image reflected in the mirror. The reflection, like the whole of our experience, cannot adequately be described in conceptual terms.

Phenomena are merely an unending succession of momentary arising of appearances, structured in a particular fashion, having no independent existence. They are not describable by any of the four propositions of existing, non-existing, both existing and not-existing and being neither existing nor non-existing—either in their causes or in their effects. No particular real point of their arising can even be discovered, and partial notions about them, such as that they are permanent or impermanent, and so on, are all inadequate to describe their actual nature. This unreal, apparent existence of reflections in the mirror is simply appearances occurring due to causes and conditions. And these conditioned appearances are in no way distinct from the fundamental emptiness, which has already been described.

Thus, in the view of Middle-way, the truth of suffering, the truth of the cause of suffering, as well as eating, sleeping and other ordinary worldly activities are all equally devoid of any essential nature of their own. They occur through conditioned arising without having any fundamental reality whatsoever. Only if phenomena are actually empty can the world as we experience it appear. If emptiness were something completely distinct from our common experience, there would be no way for any of that experience to have occurred in the first
Emptiness is not isolated from our ordinary experience, nor is it in any way divorced from the Four Noble Truths and the path to freedom from suffering.

Now all these forms of conditioned arising which, as we have demonstrated by means of the four analyses of the Middle-way, have no fundamental reality, nevertheless arise as if they were actually there, just as an elephant in our dream really seems to be there. But if we examine conditions in the world—examine how they arise, examine their fruition, and look for their essential quality—we will see, that things have no solid reality; they merely occur due to particular conditions. Nagarjuna discusses these points in greater detail in the Treatise on the Middle Way.

Just as someone locked in a prison has no way to escape except by opening the cell door, so we who are caught in the realm of the suffering of cyclic existence have no way to free ourselves except through recognizing the fundamental nature of reality, which is emptiness. Recognizing this fundamental nature of reality is sometimes called “the three liberating factors.” These factors are: (1) that no real cause can ever be discovered; (2) that resultant conditions have no true nature of their own; and (3) the recognition of the essentially empty quality of all appearances. By apprehending the truth of these three factors, we can gain understanding and attain freedom from samsara.

This supreme view of emptiness unites the conventional truth and the ultimate truth. That is, Middle-way emptiness is not blank nothingness, a mere void; rather it is a total potentiality that gives rise to all the appearances that occur to sentient beings.

To attain realization one must have an integrated view of the conventional and ultimate levels of reality. This supreme field of insight, the dharmadhatu, or in English “expanse of dharmas” or “expanse of phenomena,” is often referred to as the “mother of all buddhas and bodhisattvas.” Just as a mother gives birth to children, so insight into the fundamental nature produced all the enlightened beings of the past, present, and the future.

The fundamental nature of the universe is the union of emptiness and appearance where everything is empty, but also in this emptiness arise all appearances. Even though in the preceding text we have tried to describe how this is true, the union of emptiness and appearances is indescribable and its understanding transcends all logical statements.

If we rest in meditative awareness of this non-discriminating wisdom, which is beyond conception, and we also recognize that all dharmas are like illusions, dreams, or reflections having no fundamental reality, then when we come out of our meditation, we will develop confidence in the correct view—the union of the conventional and ultimate levels of reality. This is the great tool given to us in the transcendent knowledge of the Prajnaparamita.

This tool of transcendent knowledge might be illustrated in the following way: if we want to go from here to Kathmandu, we should first try to find out which direction Kathmandu is from our present position. Having determined that, we would then know which way to go to get there and could give other people proper directions as well. Transcendent knowledge is like a map showing us the way.
If we attain true insight into the true nature, as expressed by arising of appearances, then we will be able to demonstrate the true nature of emptiness to all sentient beings. If insight into emptiness has no direct relation to appearances, then anyone who attained such insight would have no perception of other sentient beings and would therefore never teach and the teaching of emptiness would never spread.

A merely intellectual understanding of the unity of appearance and emptiness does not empower us to be able to demonstrate such emptiness to others. Only with direct insight into the fundamental nature can we begin to demonstrate to beings this fundamental emptiness that is, in itself, brilliantly expressive. So the understanding of emptiness is the source and the reality of the whole Mahayana path of realization of buddhahood.

**Conclusion**

We have now discussed the lack of any essential reality in the mundane self from the point of view of conditioned arising and by means of the example of the cart. We have also examined the lack of any true, inherent reality in all phenomenal appearances, by looking for their point of arising, analyzing their resultant conditions, and searching for their essential nature. We examined everything according to the four different approaches found in the classical Sanskrit scriptures. Mipham Rinpoche brought these together in a single text called the *Gateway to Knowledge*.

In general, we come to know things in three ways: by direct perception, by inference, and by authoritative report. To develop insight into the nature of reality Buddhist practitioners should not accept a report from just anyone, but should rely on the teachings of individuals who have outstanding qualities and realization. To achieve this understanding of the direct insight into the true nature of reality, we must first listen to and study the logical arguments that explain this nature. Thus, to develop the direct perception from the practice of Mahamudra, we have to first develop a proper understanding of Mahamudra. This support from the teachings contained in this book and others helps us in our practice of Mahamudra, which then leads to direct insight into the fundamental nature of reality.

**The Dedication**

I have taught a little of the correct view of Madhyamaka and I urge you all to pray that whatever merit you have created by trying to understand this correct view will not go merely to benefit yourselves alone, but be distributed to all beings, so that all may attain complete and perfect realization.
The Twenty Wrong Views of Self
(Tib. dag ta nyi shu)

The twenty wrong views of self are:
1. The skandha of form as a self
2. The view of self as possessing form
3. The view of self as abiding in form
4. The view of form as abiding in the self
5. The view of feeling as a self
6. The view of self as possessing feeling
7. The view of self as abiding in feeling
8. The view of feeling as abiding in self
9. The view of perception as the self
10. The view of the self as possessing perception
11. The view of the self as abiding in perception
12. The view of perception as abiding in the self
13. The view of compositional factors as the self
14. The view of the self as possessing compositional factors
15. The view of the self as abiding in compositional factors
16. The view of compositional factors as abiding in the self
17. The view of consciousness as the self
18. The view of the self as possessing consciousness
19. The view of the self as abiding in consciousness
20. The view of consciousness as abiding in the self.

These twenty views were originally developed by Haradata.
The four great logical arguments of the Middle Way are:

1. The investigation of the cause: the Diamond Splinters
2. The investigation of the result: refuting existent or non-existent results
3. The investigation of the essential identity: “neither one nor many”
4. The investigation of all: the Great Interdependence

I. INVESTIGATION OF THE CAUSE: THE DIAMOND SPLINTERS

A. SOMETHING ARISING FROM ITSELF

On a mere conventional level, it is indeed true that an effect is produced from a cause, but, if investigated on the ultimate level, production cannot be observed. If production capable of withstanding logical analysis did exist, it must necessarily be a production by means of one of the following four extremes: self, other, both or neither (or causeless). But these are unreasonable.

As it is said in the Treatise on the Middle Way:

Not from self, not from other,
Not from both and not from neither—
Not for any entity at all anywhere,
Is there ever any production.

Why? For a thing to be produced from itself is illogical because once something exists with its own particular identity, it is pointless for it to arise once again. It is like a child who has already been born and is not born again. If a seed, for example, were produced over again, it would be produced again and again without end. There would be no opportunity for the development of the other stages, such as the sprout, the stalk and so on.

According to the Samkhya who assert self-production, in the same way that different manifestations, such as vases, can be created from the single nature of clay, seeds and so on are of a single nature, and abandon their seed-like manifestation as they are transformed into the manifestation of a sprout. If it is claimed that the various stages such as those of the seed and sprout are one, in spite of the fact that they have distinctions in terms of existing or not existing presently, color, shape and so on, then that is open to invalidation by consequential reasoning, since it would follow that fire and water, or virtue and evil, must also be one.

You might think that a seed and sprout are not equivalent to fire and water because they belong to the same continuum. Yet a “continuum” is merely an imputation based on the uninterrupted resemblance of momentary phenomena, and does not really exist.

As it says in the Introduction to the Middle Way:

If one supposes that what has already been produced is reproduced,
Then the actual arising of a sprout and so on will never be discovered. The seed would go on reproducing itself until the end of the world. For you, there can be no difference between the seed as the active cause and the sprout in terms of shape, color, flavor, capacity or ripening. If this seed of yours is no different from the sprout, then whilst the seed exists, there is nothing one might call “sprout,” or else, since they are identical, whilst the sprout exists. How could that [i.e. the seed] be apprehended? It is untenable.

And:

Only once the cause has disappeared does one see the effect, so the claim that they’re the same is rejected even by the world.

It is not only according to treatises, but also the direct experience of worldly beings that the effect follows the disappearance of the cause, and so since even they would not accept the cause to be the same as the effect, self-production does not exist on either of the two levels of truth.

B. SOMETHING ARISING FROM SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT

You might agree that production from self is illogical, and think that just as a child is born from its mother and a sprout is produced from its seed, production can only occur from something “other.” It is indeed true that cause and effect are labeled as “other,” but this is not a self-production that can be proven logically.

If the cause were proven to be inherently different from the effect, then the effect would not need to depend on the cause, and both would be equal in terms of their capacity. While something exists, it is unnecessary for it to be produced from something else, just as two people who have already been born are not dependent upon one another.

If one thing were to arise from another, it would follow that anything could arise from anything else, like darkness arising from a butter lamp and so on, given that there is no difference in terms of their being other.

It is said [in the Introduction to the Middle Way]:

If things could arise on the basis of something “other,”
Well then, thick darkness should come from flames.

And:

For the cause and effect to be entirely “other,”
Is never feasible.
If the cause and effect were entirely other,
Causes would be just the same as non-causes.

Then you might say, “In the case of anything truly different such as light and darkness and so on, cause and effect would be unpredictable. But seeds and sprouts and so on have an uncommon acting causal relationship of influencer and influenced, and so the preceding cause produces a subsequent effect. And so there is no question of anything arising from anything else, like darkness from flames.
and so on.”

Then, it is said [in the Introduction to the Middle Way]:

You do not accept that barley, stamens, Kimshuka and so on
Can produce a rice sprout, because they lack the capability,
They are not within the same continuum, and are not similar.
It is the same for the rice seed, we say, because of being “other.”

In the same way that barley and flowers, stones and so on can not be included
within the same continuum as the cause of a rice sprout or be said to be of “similar
type,” so too, the barley seed and its sprout, if they are established as truly “other”
from the perspective of ultimate analysis, cannot ultimately belong to the same
continuum.

Even though this does not affect the ultimate conclusion that it is wholly
unacceptable for a thing’s own producers to belong to its same continuum, it is
acceptable to classify a producer as belonging to the same continuum on the
conventional level, based on the ultimately incontrovertible point that things are
not inherently ‘other’, but arise in interdependence.

Moreover, since at any given time, either the seed or the sprout will be non-
existent, having not yet arisen or already ceased, how could it be feasible for them
to be “influencer” and “influenced.” These are mere imputations.

You might say, “Although the seed and sprout do not exist at the same time,
there is no fault because they arise and cease like the up and down movements of
a pair of scales.” If this is your claim, then while the seed is ceasing, it is
approaching destruction and although it exists in the present, it does not remain in
the next instant. And the sprout, while it is in the process of arising, is approaching
production so it does not exist at the same time as the seed. So there never could be
any contact between the two, and the example of the scales is meaningless.

A Treatise on the Middle Way says:

If the eye consciousness already exists as other than its own simultaneous
producers,
Such as the eye and the co-emergent perception and so on,
What need is there for it to be produced?
If it does not exist, then the faults of this were already explained.

If eye consciousness already existed as something other than its own producers
such as the eye faculty and the visual object and so on, and also its concurrent
mental states such as sensation and perception, then there would be no need for
its production. If it did not exist already, then these could not be something “other.”

Therefore, the mind and mental states and the four elements that exist at the
same time are merely labeled as causes and effects, whilst if the mind and mental
states and so on were produced inherently as something truly “other,” that would
entail the faults already described.

So, regarding production such as that of the sprout from the seed, the Acharya
Nagarjuna said:

From a seed that is destroyed or intact,
The sprout is not produced,
So you taught that all production
Is just like magical creation.

As it is said, the appearances of dependent origination cannot withstand logical analysis, and when investigated using reasoning that inquires into the ultimate, not even the slightest so-called “production” may be observed. Yet, when left unanalyzed, just like the appearances during a dream, a sprout appears to be produced from a seed. This is simply the way in which the conventional is presented.

Similarly, at a merely conventional level, the continuum of similarity is said to remain and cease, but ultimately, since no arising is observed in the beginning, there can be no true ceasing at the end nor any abiding in the interim. Thus things are devoid of arising, dwelling and ceasing.

Therefore, appearances—when viewed from the perspective of the non-paradoxical unity of the two truths—are just like the examples of an illusion, dream, city of gandharvas, reflection of the moon in water and so on.

When analyzing in this way, using ultimate reasoning, because of the crucial point that all phenomena lack inherent existence, seeds and sprouts and so on can not be established as having any essential identity, whether as truly identical, ‘other’ or whatever.

Others (the proponents of real entities within the Buddhist tradition) may say: “Although the other three types of production—self-production and so on—may be refuted, if we do not accept production from other, won’t we be contradicting the normal conventions of the world, such as the fact that sprouts arise from seeds and butter from curd?” There is no contradiction. In reality, if we apply reasoning, then not only at an ultimate level, but also conventionally speaking, arising is never really observed. If production were observable and proven conventionally, then it would follow that conventionally true phenomena such as the aggregates and elements would become immune to ultimate analysis. It would also follow that ultimate or truly existent arising would not be refuted. And it would follow that the equipoise of noble beings would become a cause for destroying previously existent conventional phenomena, which would lead to the extreme of deprecating the existent by labeling it non-existent. In any case, what is claimed is not possible.

In short, from the perspective of ultimate analysis, no phenomena whatsoever may be observed that are established as genuinely existent, whilst from the perspective of reasoning inquiring into the conventional, things are observed. That these two points are consistent, and established as a single reality is the assertion of the followers of the Middle-way beyond extremes.

Yet those who speak of real entities disagree, for they consider emptiness and dependently originating appearance to be mutually opposed. They believe that whatever is refuted by ultimate analysis must be completely non-existent even on a conventional level, just like the horns of a rabbit. Or else, that whatever exists conventionally, such as pillars and vases, could never be refuted by ultimate reasoning. They conceive of some independent object of negation separate from the conventional phenomena that are the basis of negation and they consider
emptiness—which for them is the refutation of a separate phenomenon called “true existence”—and appearances, the basis for that refutation, to be directly opposed to one another, like the total non-existence of the horns of rabbits and the real existence of the horns of cattle. Asserting this to be a unity, by mentally ‘binding’ these two to an entity such as a vase is tantamount to claiming that emptiness is an affirming negation, and in the end it does not even go beyond the views of the proponents of true entities. This point has already been well made by the great logicians of the past.

C. Something Arising from Both Itself and from Something Else

The Samkhyaas who speak of primal substance and an almighty god assert production from both self and other, but this carries the faults mentioned in both the earlier positions. As it is said [in A Treatise on the Middle Way]:

*Production from both is inherently unreasonable,*
*Because it would entail the problems already explained.*
*So, this position is unacceptable from the perspective of either of the two truths.*

D. Something Arising from No Causes

As for the assertion that there is no arising from self, from other or from both, but that there could be production without any cause, it is said [in the Introduction to the Middle Way]:

*If the world were devoid of any cause, then it might be apprehended *
*Like the fragrance and color of a blue lotus in space,*
*Yet this world is apprehended in all its rich variety,*
*And so, just like one's own mind, it should be known to arise from causes.*

This has already been refuted in more detail above, in the context of the philosophical schools [the Gateway to Knowledge] where it was shown how it entails either permanent existence or non-existence.

In this way, when analyzing using the logical arguments that refute production from the four extremes of self, other, both and neither, no phenomenon whatsoever may be seen to arise in the beginning, and therefore to possess the other features of remaining in the middle or ceasing in the end. And so the conceptual elaborations of the eight extremes such as ultimate arising and so on are pacified with regard to these unceasing mere relative appearances, and this should be understood as the unity of appearance and emptiness. This is taught more elaborately in the Introduction to the Middle Way.

**Summary [Refutation of Productions from Four Alternatives]**

When analyzed, production cannot be established as occurring in any of these four possible ways: (1) several causes producing a single result, (2) several causes producing several results, (3) a single cause producing several results or (4) a single cause producing a single result.

You might think that it is only possible for several distinct causes, such as the object of a visible form, the unimpaired sense faculty, the immediately preceding
mental attention, an unobstructed appearance and accommodating space, to produce the result of a single visual consciousness.

In which case, since several distinct causes produce only a single result, the object, faculty and so on do produce the visual consciousness, but it must follow that there can be no other cause for its singularity. Similarly, as long as a single cause is incapable of producing a single effect, there is no cause for singularity or plurality, one-ness or many-ness. And since there is no knowable phenomenon that does not fall into either category (of one or many), whatever is singular or plural must either remain that way forever or never come into being at any time or place. This is because there is no cause for being singular or plural.

You might think that several causes produce several effects, the immediate intention of wishing to look producing the visual consciousness of a mental nature, the support of the eye faculty producing the apprehension of the object, and the apparent object such as a vase producing its own particular mental features. In that case, since it would be produced by these various causes, it would have the various features just described, such as having a mental nature and so on, and so that eye consciousness would become many, equal in number to its aspects described above. If that is accepted, then the resultant visual consciousness is not produced by these causes such as the intention and so on. The particular aspects such as the mental nature, the endowment with the features of the object and so on are produced individually, but the one who possesses these aspects, the visual consciousness itself, has no cause and is therefore not produced by anything.

You might respond by saying that the apprehension of the object and the other aspects are not separate, in the sense that they are nothing other than consciousness. But then it would be meaningless to call this “several causes producing several effects.” It becomes “several causes producing a single effect,” and the problems involved in such an assertion, i.e. because one and many are uncaused, things must be either permanently existent or non-existent, have been explained above.

You may think that there is still no fault because the aspects and the possessor of these aspects are of the same essential identity, and only labeled as separate based on conceptual distinctions. In that case the causes, such as attention, would perform their function for the conceptual distinctions, the imputed phenomena such as the mental nature and so on, but the substantially existent consciousness itself would not be produced by any cause, and so consciousness would be causeless.

If you claim that the essential identity of the effect is one, but its aspects are multiple, then this leads to the fault of the qualities being separate from that which possesses them.

You might consider that the single cause of a blue flower produces several effects, such as that flower’s own subsequent “similar type” and the visual consciousness of sentient beings, for example. The question is: does that cause, i.e., the flower, perform this production by itself exclusively, without relying on any other factors, or is it done together with other assisting factors, such as the faculties? In the first case of production by itself alone, since it would not be able
to produce a plurality, this implies causeless production. Similarly, since one cause also can not perform the function of producing one effect, then it follows that the single and the multiple must both lack causes, and once again there is the fault of production occurring without any cause, as explained above.

If the object, like the blue [flower], produces the visual consciousness in dependence on other causes, such as the appearance, sense faculty, attention and so on, and you say that it has been produced by other causes as well, the result will cease to be singular, because it will possess several features or qualities that have been produced by the various causes, such as the object, faculty and attention.

Then, it might be said that a single cause only produces its own single result. If that were the case, then since a cause such as the eye faculty could only produce the result of its own subsequent “resemblance,” and could never perform the function of producing anything else, such as a visual consciousness directly apprehending an object, there would be no cause for beings’ visual or auditory consciousnesses and so on, and so these effects would be impossible, with the absurd consequence that everyone would be deaf and blind.

As it says in the Two Truths of the Middle Way [by Jñanagarbha]:

Several things do not produce just one thing,
And many things do not create a multiplicity.
One thing is not produced by many things.
And from a single thing, a single thing is not produced.

This was stated in accordance with such reasoning.

Moreover, other arguments might be given in response to one who asserts that several causes, such as the appearance, faculty and attention, give rise to a single result, such as visual cognition. [For example,) even if it is granted that the resultant eye consciousness does not have several qualities and is singular, it is impossible for any knowable phenomenon to be truly singular, as in the case of a visual consciousness devoid of its accompanying mental states, such as the ever-present states and so on.

You might think that many causes produce many effects, but then since it would be impossible for several causes to produce only a single effect, it would be quite meaningless to speak of a gathering of several causes. When singular phenomena cannot be established, the “many” that they go together to produce will not be established either, and will not exist.

The assertion that one cause produces several effects is also unsound, since it presupposes a single cause that cannot be divided into parts, and this is impossible. It can be seen that a single cause such as a seed would be incapable of producing its effect, the sprout, without relying upon other conditions, such as earth, water, warmth, time and so on.

It is also not the case that a single cause gives rise to a single effect, since this is contrary to direct experience, namely the successive production of a variety of effects like the sprout, the flower, the fruit and so on, from a variety of causes and conditions such as the seed, water, fertilizer, heat, moisture and so on.

Therefore, when thoroughly examining, a truly singular phenomenon that
lacks a plurality of features or qualities cannot be established at all, whether as a causal or resultant entity. And without any such singular phenomenon, then the plural too, which must necessarily be composed of the singular, must also be non-existent.

Nevertheless, in the case of a thing such as a sprout, even though it consists of several parts such as its color and shape and so on, they are still labeled as one thing, i.e. a sprout, based on their similarity of type and so forth. And also in the case of a single phenomenon such as a particle, when dividing it according to its features, such as substance and direction, it is labeled as multiple. Yet it is simply through the power of dependent origination or “dependent definition”, that these are conventionally designated as causes and effects. When analyzing with ultimate reasoning, they cannot be established according to any of these four alternatives of single, multiple, etc., and therefore since these conventional entities do not withstand investigation, they should be understood to be just like the appearances during a dream.

Although this reasoning is sometimes called “the investigation of both the cause and the effect: refuting production according to the four alternatives” thus giving a total of five great logical arguments—and ultimately there is no real contradiction in explaining it that way—it seems reasonable to include it within the category of investigation of the cause, so that there are a total of four great logical arguments.

There are also other arguments which investigate the cause, effect and identity, such as, for example, the division into the three times of past, present and future, i.e., the result that was produced in the past has already arisen and has now ceased, so it is not produced. The result of the future has not yet arisen in the present, and so it is not produced. And finally, the present result has already been established as its own identity and so it would be meaningless for it to be produced again.

II. The Second Madhyamaka Analysis: Examining Effects

Regarding the effect that is produced, if one examines whether it is an existent effect that arises or a non-existent one, or one that is both or neither, the Treatise on the Middle Way says:

*If it is something existent, what need is there for its production?*
*But if it does not exist, what could be done to it?*
*If it is both [existent and non-existent], what can be done?*
*And if neither, what can be done?*

A. The Effects Already Exist When the Phenomena Arise

If you consider that the result to be produced is something existent which develops, this is unreasonable. Why? If it is existent, then it must exist having already established its own identity as a sprout and so on, and being existent, it would be unnecessary for it to be produced anew. It is just like a grain of barley, which, having ripened once, does not need to ripen all over again. If something already existent still needed to be produced then that would lead to the fault of production continuing ad infinitum.
“Well then,” you might think, “It is something non-existent that is produced.” But in that case, it would be impossible to produce. For example, even if someone were to go to great lengths to assemble hundreds of causes and conditions, they would still never be able to produce the non-existent horns on the head of a rabbit.

**B. The Effects Do Not Exist When the Phenomena Arise**

You might think that the effect, such as the sprout, was formerly non-existent, but is made anew into something existent by the causes such as the seed. It is not so. Since existent and non-existent are mutually contradictory, they could never combine on the basis of a single entity. In terms of actual entities, there are no phenomena whatsoever that were formerly non-existent, and later changed into something existent. Causes and conditions could not transform unconditioned space, for example, into the identity of a conditioned, existent phenomenon.

Thus, simply on a conventional level, effects appear based on causes. Formerly, prior to the gathering of their causes and conditions, they did not appear, and now, when the causes and conditions are assembled, they do. The mind relates these two stages to one another, and then there is the merely conceptual statement, “This did not exist before, but now it is arising!”

Similarly, one mentally relates earlier and later occasions and, in relation to a given phenomenon, thinks, “This existed previously, and then it did not exist.”

Thus, the phenomena that are conventional entities simply appear by the force of dependent origination, and in reality there are no existent phenomena whatsoever that transform into non-existent ones, and there are no non-existent phenomena that transform into existent ones.

It is similar in the case of conditioned formations arising anew and finally ceasing, or the continua of “similar type” remaining and not remaining, the perception of an existent self of the individual or phenomena and the perception of no-self. The explanation is similar to that given in the case of existent and non-existent phenomena. They are all merely appearances on the conventional, relative level, and ultimately, they are empty of their own essential identity. At the level of the genuine nature of things, there is no observation of any features such as the transformation of something existent into something non-existent or non-existent into existent, of any going or coming, arising or ceasing, increasing or decreasing.

**C. The Effects Both Exist and Do Not Exist When the Phenomena Arise**

You might wonder how it is that production of results should be asserted, given that neither existent nor non-existent effects are produced, and that, aside from these two, no third mode of production is possible. It is asserted that the arising of effects is nothing other than the undeceiving appearance of dependent origination, and when analyzed as to whether it is existent or non-existent, it is not established in any way whatsoever, but is just like the example of a magical illusion and so on.

It is impossible for a knowable phenomenon to be both existent and non-existent, since these two are directly opposed to one another. And it is also impossible for a phenomenon to be neither existent nor non-existent, because it is
impossible for there to be some third option in between these two directly opposed positions.

“Well then,” you might think, “just as it is impossible here to have the option of neither, there cannot be this option of ‘neither’ in the context of freedom from conceptual elaboration of the four extremes, such as existing, not existing and so on.” And, you might think, “Just as in the assertion made without specifying ‘not existent and not non-existent’, it is impossible for there to be a third option between direct opposites, so the natural state can be understood through the two negations, and there is nothing meaningful in defining what ‘nothing whatsoever’ means. Thus, apart from the rather deceitful position of asserting nothing at all, our own tradition does not make any kind of definite statement about how things are.” This might be how spiritually immature beginners think it is, but it is not like that at all.

**D. The Effects Neither Exist nor Do Not Exist When the Phenomena Arise**

As long as one still maintains a basis for conceptual reference, there cannot possibly be an apprehension that does away with the four extremes altogether. Therefore, whatever assertions are made by applying particular distinctions—like saying, “There is no snake in this house, but there is a vase”—they are conceptual references involving particular conceptual ideas, and so they are not beyond the realms of ordinary conceptual thought. In the actual state of simplicity, in which all conceptual focus has subsided, there are no assertions or conceptual references whatsoever with regard to the four extremes. Even so, it is quite unlike the dull confusion of not having realized ultimate reality, or a state of unconsciousness. It is a state difficult to express by words or through examples, which is—as it says in Rahula’s *Praise to the Great Mother Prajñāparamita*—beyond words, beyond thought and beyond description. It is simplicity that is discerned by means of one’s own individual awareness, in which all doubts have been cut through: a non-conceptual primordial awareness free from dualistic perceptions, but naturally luminous like the shining sun.

**III. Third Madhyamaka Analysis: Finding the Essential Nature of Neither One nor Many**

To begin with, there is an analysis of the essential identity of all conditioned and unconditioned phenomena to determine whether or not there is true singularity. In the case of those conditioned phenomena of the five aggregates possessing physical form, there is a division into above, below, the cardinal and intermediate directions and the centre. Through this, it can be seen that, for something such as a vase, singularity is simply a conceptual notion applied to the various features that are the basis for such an imputation. True singularity is not established, and the same applies in the case of its component parts. The body and the limbs are also divided into parts in the same way.

In short, all that possesses physical form and is composed of material particles may be broken down to its basis, which is the infinitely small particle. And, according to the logic explained before, for that most subtle particle to be surrounded by particles in the various directions, it must have sides, which means
it must have parts, and so on, in an infinite regression. If not, then however many subtle particles are gathered together, they could never grow any larger. Thus, all phenomena with material form lack true singularity.

In addition, the eight or the six collections of consciousness can not be established as truly singular since they consist of various cognitive acts and mental states, take various features as their focus, and arise in different forms from the gathering of the four conditions, and then cease.

By analyzing everything that has the nature of arising and ceasing deriving from its own causes, even the subtlest indivisible moment cannot be established, and so all phenomena included within mind and matter lack any true singularity. As for non-concurrent formations, they are simply imputations made upon the ‘occasion’ of mind and matter, and so they lack any essential identity. Unconditioned phenomena are imputations made with regard to the eliminated aspects of objects of negation, and are also lacking in any essential identity.

In short, all conditioned and unconditioned phenomena cannot be shown to have any true singularity, and since this is not established, plurality that is made up of what is singular must also remain unestablished. And so, since there is no mode of true existence aside from being truly singular or plural, it must follow that individuals and phenomena are proven to be without inherent identity, just as it is explained more elaborately in the Ornament of the Middle Way.

IV. Analysis of All Sources: The Logical Argument of Great Interdependence

All phenomena do not come into being through their own inherent identity, but as a result of the coming together of causes and conditions, and when there are no conditions they do not arise. Even at the time when they appear, they appear whilst lacking any inherent existence, since they are like reflections, brought about by causes and conditions. Free from any conceptual elaborations such as being permanent or non-existent, going or coming, arising or ceasing or being one or many, they appear whilst lacking true reality.

When evaluating in this way, using reasoning investigating the ultimate in accordance with the actual nature of things, they are found to be mere unfailing dependent arising. Otherwise, if they were truly established in any way, such as arising according to the four extremes or four alternatives, or being existent or non-existent, or permanent or impermanent etc., then that would be inappropriate as an explanation for the conventional, and would result in a deprecation of all conventions.

According to the Middle-way tradition, for which the unreal illusory appearances of dependent origination and emptiness arise in the same reality, all the conventions of mere appearance are extremely reasonable. This being so, the conventions of the world, as well as the supermundane conventions of the Four Truths, Three Jewels and so on, are all perfectly established.

This king of reasonings, the Great Interdependence, includes all the other types of ultimate logic, such as the Diamond Splinter and so on, because they are all concerned with the seemingly real, unexamined appearances of dependent origination. When analyzed, no causes, effects or essential identities whatsoever
can be established. The extensive variations of this logic that investigates the meaning of dependent origination are to be found in the Root Verses of the Middle Way and elsewhere.

CONCLUSION

Therefore, at the conventional level, cause, effect and inherent identity appear in that way, and are labeled with such conventions. Ultimately, causes, effects and inherent identities lack any true nature, being emptiness with the identity of the three doors of liberation. The emptiness in which the two truths are inseparably united like this is the dharmadhatu, the object to be realized through the path of the Middle Way. It is the supreme of all that might be realized, the “mother” of the victorious buddhas and their heirs.

This point concerning equalness in which the truths of appearance and emptiness are indivisible is just like the sphere of space, and is beyond the realm of conceptual thought, unimaginable and inexpressible, yet with non-conceptual wisdom, it can be meditated in the manner of pure self-knowing awareness. During the post-mediation phase, one has the confident certainty that all things appear yet lack true reality, just like the examples of a magical illusion, dream, reflection, magical creations and so on. And, with the wisdom that thoroughly discerns the two truths, one is brought to an undeluded realization concerning all the categories of the ground, path and fruition.

Through comprehending the meaning of emptiness in this way, all the enlightened qualities of the path and fruition of the Great Vehicle will arise.

Taken from Mipham Rinpoche’s mkhas ‘jug, with supplementary material from Khenpo Nüden’s commentary.

Translated and edited by Adam Pearcey, 2005
Notes
(By Clark Johnson, Ph.D.)


2. The concept of nature was prevalent in Greece at the time of Alexander the Great’s invasion of Pakistan and India in 326 BCE. This was about a century after the Buddha passed away, and his tutor Aristotle wrote the famous book *Metaphysics* which began with the first line, “All men by nature have the desire for knowledge” showing how important the concept of nature was.

   Aristotle argued that one must define objects and since their appearances are all different ie a cup can be made of porcelain, plastic, or metal, be square or round, have a handle or not, etc, one must rely on the object’s nature or essence. Aristotle proposed four types of causes which outline the essence of an object: (1) the form of the object or the formal cause, (2) the matter of the object or the material cause, (3) the agency that brings about the object or the efficient cause, and (4) the purpose of the object or the final cause. This final cause (Greek telos) is, for example, the nature of a grain of rice that allows it to become a rice plant.

   This concept is still an important and widely used concept in Hindu and Buddhist philosophy to this day.


7. The extreme of eternalism is to hold the view that we possess an indestructible “soul” which is a real and solid entity that passes from one lifetime to the next. The extreme of nihilism is that everything is empty and therefore there is no karma so we might just do whatever we want without considering its effects on ourselves or others.

8. The root text that Thrangu Rinpoche is basing his commentary on is Mipham Rinpoche’s *Entrance to the Way of the Learned*. This root text was translated by Adam Pearcey. His translation can be found on the website as *The Four Logical Arguments* on www.lotsawahouse.org.

9. Mahamudra is one of the fundamental meditations of the Kagyu lineage. It is characterized by not doing elaborate practices, but involving looking directly
into the mind. It is similar to the Nyingma lineage’s meditation of Dzogchen. See Thrangu Rinpoche’s *The Essentials of Mahamudra* for a more complete description of Mahamudra meditation.

10. The five works of Maitreya were received by Asanga when he went to the Tushita pure realm and they are:

*The Ornament of Clear Realization*
*The Uttaratantra*
*The Ornament of the Mahayana Sutras*
*Differentiating the Middle from the Extremes*
*Differentiating Dharma from Dharmata*

Asanga also wrote commentaries on each of these texts. Thrangu Rinpoche has also written commentaries on four of these five texts. They are given in the bibliography.

11. The Shentong (“empty of other”) and Rangtong (“empty of self”) is a distinction made only in Tibet and cannot specifically be found in the Indian Buddhist literature. The Rangtong view, to greatly simplify, is that everything is empty and therefore the third turning of the wheel of dharma, which believes in a permanent Buddha-nature, was not quite correct (but rather a provisional view). This view is mainly held by the Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism. The Shentong school holds that Buddha-nature pervades all sentient beings and so all these beings have the potential to reach enlightenment. This view is taught in the third turning of the wheel of dharma, and so the Shentong school holds that the third turning is the definitive most complete teaching. The Shentong school is held mostly by the Kagyu and Nyingma schools and this is the viewpoint that Thrangu Rinpoche takes in *The Open Door to Emptiness*. Both Rangtong and Shentong schools agree that on the conventional level of reality, all things are empty of inherent existence.

This difference between Rangtong and Shentong is explained in much greater detail in Hookham’s *The Buddha Within* and in Brunholzl’s *Center of the Sunlit Sky*.

12. Buddhists hold a view quite opposite to common sense or that held in the West; they believe that the world we perceive is not really an accurate reflection of reality, but rather is just an illusion or an appearance. What we perceive is relative or conventional truth or reality (Tib. *kunzop*), while an enlightened person can see the world “as it really is;” as its absolute or ultimate truth or reality (Tib. *dondam*). Ordinary beings see external phenomena as solid and real and experience existence as the continual ups and downs of samsara, while ultimately, external phenomena are not this at all; they are empty.

13. Aggregates (Skt. *skandha*) literally means “heaps” or “piles” as in a pile of rocks. These are basically all the constituents in the world. The first aggregate is form and this applies to all external objects that can be perceived through the senses. The last four aggregates are mental processes for analyzing the world around
us. First, a visual image, sound, taste, smell, or touch contacts the sense faculty of the individual. This is the first aggregate of “form.” Second is the aggregate of feeling in which mental representations of form are automatically classified as beautiful, pleasant, or desirable or as ugly, threatening, or undesirable, or as simply neutral. The sense perception itself, of course, is none of these—it is simply a sensory perception. Third, the sensory perception is identified so one identifies the perception as “a chair” or “my wife” or the like. This aggregate has been translated as “identification” or “discrimination” and this process, of course, involves past experience. After the sensory perception is identified, it is connected with previous conditioning and habitual patterns in the fourth aggregate, which is translated as “formation.” So we not only identify the object, but all our past history with the object and what it is related to is part of this perception. The last aggregate is “consciousness” and this occurs when the perception enters the sixth mental consciousness as a mental object. Although we can divide these aggregates up as distinct units intellectually, they are actually a continuous, indivisible process of perception.

The point here is that we have each of the skandhas arising for each visual, auditory, gustatory, etc. sensation so there are thousands of distinct processes going on at any one time in our “mind,” rather than the experience of a simple unitary mind which is our conventional experience of self.

14. In Buddhist logic there is strong emphasis on phenomena which are a composite and those which are not composite. For example, a tree, house, person’s body, or cup is a composite phenomenon because it is made up of many smaller elements. A cup, for example, is made up of paint, a finish, and clay, which is made up of silicon and oxygen. When the cup is left alone for hundreds of years, it breaks into small pieces and it thrown away and eventually ends up in the earth as its constituent elements. Because it is a composite, it is therefore impermanent and not eternal and is empty of any true nature i.e. the “cupness” or function of a cup is eventually destroyed and it eventually becomes the nature of dust. Buddha-nature, on the other hand, is not a composite of anything and therefore is permanent and enduring.

15. There is an issue of terminology that often confuses persons who have not studied the Middle-way teachings. When we say, “trying to discover the self” and later conclude that “you cannot find the self because it is non-existent” what this means in this text is not that the “self” (Tib. dak) is the body as when we say, “This is me” pointing to our body. Rather, “self” refers to the huge story line we develop to explain ourselves and our thoughts, which begins at birth and continues all the way to death. The story-line is like: “I was born to my parents who were like this and that and they taught me so and so and I always liked such and such people because these people loved and liked me and I don’t like these people and situations because I wasn’t respected because of so and so. I have these good traits of such and such, but don’t like persons and situations that are like so and so.”
This story line, which each person carries around and believes to be true and correct and real, is actually, on careful examination, simply a mental construction. The actual self is continuously changing and different when viewed by other people. Obviously this “self” exists, but it exists in the same way a reflection of the moon appears on a lake or a rainbow. So we can say the “self” appears because everyone experiences a self, but like a rainbow it is insubstantial which is a better word than non-existent. This is the doctrine of “non-self” or “selflessness” or the “egolessness of self” (Tib. dakme where dak means “self” and me means “not”).

16. Thrangu Rinpoche allows his students to develop certainty about emptiness by having the students ask questions and he answers them—a well-known technique of debate practiced daily in Tibetan monastic colleges. In the West we know this as the Socratic method.

17. This sutra is called the Questions of King Melinda in the Pali texts and is said to be an encounter between the yogi Nagasena and Meander, a Greek king of Bactria (modern Pakistan).

18. In Buddhist logic there is an emphasis on everything having a primary cause or causal condition (Tib. gyu), secondary or supporting conditions (Tib. khyen) and finally an effect (Tib. de bu). For example, if we have an oak tree it did not come from nowhere, but it had to have a primary cause, which is the acorn. But the acorn alone did not cause an oak tree to grow, because it also had to have the supporting conditions of soil, water, sunlight, the right temperature, etc. In the four analyses of the Middle-way the first analysis is of this causal condition and the second analysis is of the effect, often called the “result.”

The Abhidharma actually describes six different kinds of causes and four different kinds of supporting conditions and one result. These are studied extensively in Tibetan monastic colleges and are used in their daily debates on philosophical matters.

19. This should not be taken as meaning that women cannot achieve enlightenment to the same degree as men. In fact, Rinpoche has said many times that reaching enlightenment depends only upon having a mind and making the effort to practice the Dharma and that there is absolutely no difference in that regard between men and women.

20. Thrangu Rinpoche was born in 1933.

21. Thrangu Rinpoche gave a seven-day teaching on Shantirashita’s One and Many analysis in Crestone, Colorado in 2010.

22. The Foundation schools hold that there are six consciousnesses, as do some of the Mahayana schools, but the Mind-only or Chittamattra school of Mahayana Buddhism holds that there are eight consciousnesses. These are explained in greater detail in Thrangu Rinpoche’s Transcending Ego: Distinguishing Consciousness from Wisdom.
23. This is the root text and we have simply added headings in small caps to make it conform to Thrangu Rinpoche's text.

24. For those not familiar with Madhyamaka or Middle-way logic this is the four-fold reasoning introduced by Nagarjuna. In the very first verse of the Treatise of the Middle Way, the central thesis on the Madhyamaka, it says: “Nowhere are there entities that have originated from themselves, from another, from both, or from no cause at all.” This one sentence is considered the essence of the Middle-way and is actually the “vajra splinter.”

In condition of (a) the effect having the same nature as its causes: in this context it means that a grain of rice and the rice plant have the same inherent nature and the Samkhya school would argue that the cause is the rice seed and the effect is the rice plant. Since the seed and plant obviously have the same inherent nature of “rice,” the rice plant just appears with no cause and effect. This is called “something arising from itself.”

In condition (b) the effect having a completely different nature from its effect: we could argue that a mother (the cause of the birth) who is a woman and mature has a completely different nature (essence) than a helpless newborn male child.

In condition (c) the root text (see appendix A) says that the Samkhya school holds basically that everything has an inherent essence and it is a creator who imbues this substance with the qualities that differentiates the substance into the vast variety of phenomena. This does not make logical sense because we have already proved that phenomena don’t arise from themselves and also don’t arise from anything else, so it couldn’t arise out of both of these conditions.

In the condition (d) where the effect arises neither from itself nor from anything else, which is held by the Carvaka school, this basically violates the assumption that there is cause and effect in the world. Without cause and effect there is no karma, and this is why Carvakas can say there is no right or wrong and so we can do anything we want with no consequences beyond what we get caught at.

25. The eight extremes are arising, ceasing, permanence, non-existence, coming, going, plurality and singularity.
Aryadeva was born in Sri Lanka (Ceylon) in the 3rd century of our era. He was Nagarjuna’s closest disciple and helped clarify the Madhyamaka view. He is known for writing the Four Hundred Verses (Skt. *catusataka*), which was in sixteen chapters.
The Glossary of Terms

Abhidharma  The Buddhist teachings are often divided into the Tripitaka: the Sutras (teachings of the Buddha), the Vinaya (teachings on conduct), and the Abhidharma, which is the analyses of phenomena that exist primarily as a commentarial tradition to the Buddhist teachings.

afflicted consciousness  The seventh consciousness. It has two aspects: the immediate consciousness, which monitors the other consciousnesses making them continuous, and the klesha consciousness, which is the continuous presence of self. See consciousnesses, eight.

aggregates, five  (Skt. skandha) Literally, “heaps.” The five aggregates are called “form and name.” The first aggregate is form, which is all external objects that can be sensed. The second to fifth skandhas are “name,” which are mental processes the external sensations undergo in the mind. The second aggregate is feeling where the sensation is judged pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. The third aggregate is perception where the objects are identified based on past experience. The four aggregate is formation in which the perception is compared to all previous experiences with it. The fifth aggregate is consciousness.

alaya consciousness  See consciousnesses, eight.

analytical insight  In the sutra tradition one begins by listening to the teachings, which means studying the Dharma. Then one contemplates the Dharma using analytical insight. Finally, there is actual meditation which is free from concept.

anatman  (Skt., Tib. dakme) Nonself. The belief that a person or self is insubstantial (or selfless) rather than a substantial solid entity.

arhat  Accomplished Foundation vehicle practitioners who have eliminated the emotional obscurations. They are the fully realized shrawakas and pratyekabuddhas.

Aryadeva  (3rd century CE) The closest pupil of Nagarjuna who became his heir. He was born in Sri Lanka and wrote the Catuhsha-kate.

Asanga  A fourth century Indian philosopher who founded the Chittamatra or Yogacara school and is known for revealing the five works of Maitreya. His brother was Vasubandhu.

Ashoka  (ruled 272 to 231 BCE) A king who first conquered almost all of India and then converted to Buddhism. After this he propagated the Buddhist teachings throughout India and sent Buddhist emissaries to other countries.

atman  (Skt., Tib. dak) A permanent self. The concept of atman which is a permanent, unchanging self which goes from body to body in reincarnation can be traced back to the Vedas before the birth of the Buddha.

bodhichitta  Literally, “the mind of enlightenment.” There are two kinds of bodhichitta: absolute bodhichitta, which is completely awakened mind that sees
the emptiness of phenomena, and relative bodhichitta which is the aspiration to practice the six paramitas and free all beings from the suffering of samsara.

bodhisattva Literally, “one who exhibits the mind of enlightenment.” Also an individual who has committed him or herself to the Mahayana path of compassion and the practice of the six paramitas to achieve buddhahood to free all beings from samsara.

Carvakas A philosophical school in India which didn’t believe in an afterlife, that all things happen naturally without divine intervention, that religion was solely invented by man, and therefore humans should simply enjoy any sensual pleasure they desired.

Chandrakirti (600 to 650 CE) A Indian Buddhist scholar of the Madhyamaka school who is best known for founding the Prasangika sub-school and writing two treatises on emptiness using logical reasoning.

Chittamatra school or Mind-only school. A school founded by Asanga in the fourth century. One of the four major schools in the Mahayana tradition and its main tenet (to greatly simplify) is that all phenomena are mental events.

cognitive obscurations See the obscurations, two.

consciousnesses, sensory These are the five sensory consciousnesses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch, and body sensation. These consciousnesses appear when the body comes in contact with a sight, sound, smell, taste, or touch. These consciousnesses do not evaluate the sensory input, which is done by the sixth mental consciousnesses.

consciousnesses, eight These are the five sensory consciousnesses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch, and body sensation. The sixth is mental consciousness, seventh is the afflicted consciousness, and eighth is the ground consciousness.

conventional or relative truth There are two truths or realities: relative and ultimate. Conventional reality or truth is the perception of an ordinary (unenlightened) person who sees the world as solid and real with all his or her projections based on a false belief in self.

defilements See disturbing emotions.

dharmas In the Abhidharma teachings it was proposed that there were certain factors both physical and mental which had inherent nature. Each school had a different list of these universal factors into which everything could be classified.

dharmadhatu The all-encompassing space, unoriginated and without beginning, out of which all phenomena arise. The Sanskrit means “the essence of phenomena” and the Tibetan means “the expanse of phenomena” but it usually refers to the emptiness which is the essence of phenomena.
disturbing emotions (Skt. klesha) The emotional obscurations (in contrast to intellectual obscurations) which are also translated as “afflictions” or “poisons.” The three main disturbing emotions are attachment, aggression or anger, and ignorance or delusion. The five disturbing emotions are the three above plus pride and envy or jealousy.

Dzogchen This is known also as the “great perfection” or atiyoga. It is the highest of the nine yanas according to the Nyingma tradition.

egolessness or selflessness of self See insubstantiality of self.

egolessness or selflessness of phenomena See insubstantiality of phenomena.

eight consciousnesses see consciousnesses, eight.

mahasiddha A practitioner who has a great realization. These were particularly Vajrayana practitioners who lived in India between the eight and twelfth century and practiced tantra. The biography of some of the most famous is found in The Eighty-four Mahasiddhas.

emotional obscurations See obscurations, two.

emptiness (Skt. shunyata) Also translated as voidness. The Buddha taught in the second turning of the wheel of dharma that external phenomena and the internal phenomena or the concept of self or “I” are insubstantial and therefore are “empty.”

Foundation Vehicle Also called Hinayana. The term refers to the first teachings of the Buddha, which emphasized the careful examination of mind and its confusion. Also known as the Theravada path.

Four Noble Truths The Buddha began teaching with a talk in India at Sarnath on the Four Noble Truths. These are the truth of suffering, the truth of the cause of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the path. These truths are the foundation of Buddhism.

geshe (Tib.) A scholar who has attained a doctorate in Buddhist studies. This usually takes fifteen to twenty years to attain.

ground (Skt. alaya) consciousness According to the Mind-only school this is the eighth consciousness and is often called the “store-house” or “alaya” consciousness and has the function of storing all the latent karmic imprints of experience. See consciousnesses, eight.

Indra The chief god of the realm of desire and said to reside on the top of Mt. Meru.

insubstantiality of self This doctrine asserts that when one examines or looks for the person or self, one finds that it is insubstantial or “empty.” This doctrine holds that a person does not possess a self (Skt. atman) as an independent or substantial self. This position is held by most Buddhist schools.

insubstantiality of phenomena This doctrine asserts that when one examines things or phenomena, one finds that external phenomena are empty, i.e. they
do not have an independent or substantial nature. This position is not held by the Foundation schools, but is the main premise of the Mahayana schools.

**jnana** (Tib. *yeshe*) Enlightened wisdom which is beyond dualistic thought.

**Jnanagharba** (8th century CE) A great Buddhist scholar who became a famous Svatantrika scholar. He was known for being a great debater and for composing the Madhyamaka-satyadvaya-karika.

**Kagyu** (Tib.) One of the four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism. It was founded by Marpa. The other three are the Nyingma, the Sakya, and the Gelug schools.

**karma** Literally “action.” Karma is a universal law stating that when one does a wholesome action, one’s circumstances will improve and when one does an unwholesome action, negative results will eventually occur from the act.

**khenpo** (Tib.) A title of someone who has completed many years’ study of Buddhism. It can also mean an abbot of a monastery.

**klesha** (Skt.) See disturbing emotions.

**Mahamudra** Literally, “great seal” meaning that all phenomena are sealed by the primordially perfect true nature. This meditative transmission emphasizes perceiving mind directly rather than through contemplation or rational analysis.

**Mahayana** Literally, the “great vehicle.” The teachings of the second turning of the wheel of Dharma, which emphasize emptiness, compassion, and universal buddha-nature.

**Maitreya** In this work refers to the bodhisattva Maitreya who lived at the time of the Buddha. Maitreya is presently residing in the Tushita pure realm until he becomes the fifth buddha of this eon.

**Manjushri** A meditational deity representing discriminative awareness (prajna) known for knowledge and learning. Usually depicted as holding a sword in the right hand and scripture in the left.

**Middle-way** (Skt. *Madhyamaka*) The most influential of the four schools of Indian Buddhism founded by Nagarjuna in the second century CE. The name means it is the middle way between eternalism and nihilism. The main postulate of this school is that all phenomena—both internal mental events and external physical objects—are empty of any inherent nature. The school uses extensive rational reasoning to establish the emptiness of phenomena.

**Mipham Rinpoche** (1846-1912) Great Nyingma master who was an integral part of the Rime movement. He wrote 320 Dharma works and helped renew an interest in Mahamudra and Dzogchen.

**Nagarjuna** An Indian scholar in the second century CE who founded the Madhyamaka school, which emphasized emptiness.

**nirvana** Literally, “extinguished.” Individuals live in samsara and with spiritual practice they can attain a state of enlightenment in which all false ideas and
conflicting emotions have been extinguished. This state is called “nirvana.”

Nyingma (Tib.) The oldest school of Buddhism based on the teachings of Padmasambhava and others in the eighth and ninth centuries CE.

Obscurations, two These are (1) the cognitive obscurations, mainly not recognizing the emptiness of self and phenomena and (2) the emotional obscurations, which are mainly the disturbing emotions of attachment, aggression, and ignorance.

Padmasambhava (Tib. Guru Rinpoche) He was invited to Tibet in the ninth century CE and is known for pacifying the non-Buddhist forces and founding the Nyingma lineage.

Pandita A great scholar.

Prajnaparamita sutras These teachings were made popular by Nagarjuna in the second century CE and known for introducing the concept of a bodhisattva and the concept of the insubstantiality or emptiness of phenomena. The earliest and most well known text is the Prajnaparamita in 8,000 verses.

Rangtong School (Tib.) The Middle-way school was divided in Tibet into two major schools: the Rangtong, which maintains voidness is devoid of inherent existence and Shentong, which maintains voidness is indivisible from luminosity.

Rinpoche (Tib.) Literally, “very precious” and is used as a term of respect for a Tibetan guru.

Shakyamuni Buddha The Shakyamuni Buddha, often called the Gautama Buddha; refers to the latest Buddha who lived between 563 and 483 CE.

Samadhi Also called “meditative absorption” or “one-pointed meditation.” This is the highest form of meditation and is the result of complete concentration.

Sarvastivada school A Foundation vehicle school which means “everything exists” and held there were real existing dhammas and also small indivisible particles like real atoms.

Shamatha or Tranquility meditation (Tib. shinay) This is basic sitting meditation whose main purpose is to train the mind to rest evenly and calm down so it can remain wherever it is placed.

Samkhya One of six orthodox schools of Hindu philosophy. It bases its philosophy on the Samkhya Karika written around 200 CE. It holds the view that all objects of knowledge can be enumerated into twenty-five categories of phenomena. They believe in the “fundamental principle” which is inseparable, permanent, and pervades all phenomena.

Shantarakshita (eighth century C.E.) An abbot of Nalanda University who was invited by King Trisong Detsen to come to Tibet. He established Samye Monastery and thus helped introduce Buddhism in Tibet.

Shentong school (Tib.) The Madhyamaka or Middle-way school was divided in
Tibet into two major schools: the Rangtong, which maintains voidness is devoid of inherent existence and Shentong, which maintains voidness is indivisible from luminosity.

**skandha** Literally, “heaps.” See aggregates.

**shunyata** Usually translated as voidness or emptiness. The Buddha taught in the second turning of the wheel of dharma that external phenomena and internal phenomena or the concept of self or “I” have no real existence and therefore are “empty.”

**sutra teachings** The Foundation and Mahayana texts which are the words of the Buddha. These are often contrasted with the tantras, which are the Buddha’s Vajrayana teachings and the shastras, which are commentaries by great masters on the words of the Buddha.

**tantra** One can divide Tibetan Buddhism into the sutra tradition and the tantra tradition. The sutra tradition primarily involves the academic study of the Mahayana sutras and the tantric path primarily involves practicing the Vajrayana practices. The tantras are primarily the texts of the Vajrayana practices.

**tathagata-garbha** Literally, “essence of tathagata” which is usually translated as Buddha-nature or buddha essence. It is the seed or essence of enlightenment possessed by all sentient beings and which allows them to have the potential to attain buddhahood.

**tulku** (Tib., Skt. *nirmanakaya*) A manifestation of a buddha that is perceived by an ordinary person. The term has commonly been used in Tibet for a discovered rebirth of any teacher.

**ultimate or absolute truth** There are two truths or views of reality—conventional truth, which is seeing things as ordinary beings do with the dualism of “I” and “other” and ultimate truth, which transcends duality and is seeing things as they are.

**vajra** (Tib. *dorje*) Usually translated “diamond like.” This may be an implement held in the hand during certain Vajrayana ceremonies, or it can refer to a quality that is so pure and so enduring that it is like a diamond.

**Vajradhara** (Tib. *dorje chang*) The name of the dharmakaya Buddha. Many of the teachings of the Kagyu lineage came from Vajradhara.

**Vasubandhu** Indian scholar in the 4th century CE who was brother of Asanga and wrote the great Foundation vehicle work the Abhidharma-kosha, an commentary on the Abhidharma still extensively studied in Tibet.

**Vatsipatriya** One of the early eighteen Foundation vehicle schools named after its leader Vatsipatra. It was part of the Aryasarvavastivadin sect. This group separated from the other sects in the third century BCE and was condemned because they believed that there was a self that was the basis for rebirth and karma but was not part of the five aggregates.
wheel of dharma The Buddha’s teachings correspond to three levels: the Foundation, the Mahayana and the Vajrayana with each level being one turning of the wheel.

yogi A Buddhist practitioner who has chosen an unconventional path of practice.
The Glossary of Tibetan Terms

Pronunciation (Tibetan Transliteration): Sanskrit/English

dak (bdag) self
dak me (bdag med) non-self
dag ta nyi shu (bdag lta nyi shu) 20 views of self
de bu (bras bu) effect
dorje (rdo rje) vajra
Dorje Chang (rdo rje chang) Vajradhara
dzogchen (rdzogs chen) dzogchen
geshe (dge bshes) geshe degree
Guru Rinpoche (gu ru rin po che) Padmasambhava
gyu (rgyu) primary cause
Kagyu (bka’ brgyud) Kagyu school
khenpo (mkhan po) scholar
khyen (rkhyen) second. condition
nyingma (rnying ma) Nyingma
Rangtong (rang strong) Rangtong
rang zhin (rang bzhin) nature
Shentong (gzhan strong) Shentong
shedra (bshad grva) monastic college
shinay (zhi gnas) Samantha
tong pa nyi (stong pa nyid) emptiness
tong pa nyi shu (stong pa nyid shu) 20 emptinesses
uma (dbu ma) Madhyamaka
yeshe (ye shes) wisdom
Books by Thrangu Rinpoche


The Middle-Way Meditation Instructions of Mipham Rinpoche. This great Tibetan scholar who actually stayed for awhile with the previous Thrangu Rinpoche at his monastery describes how one develops compassion and then expands this to bodhichitta and eventually develops prajna or wisdom. Namo Buddha Publications, 2000.

The Four Foundations of Buddhist Practice. There are four thoughts one should contemplate before practicing precious human birth, impermanence, karma, and the downfalls of samsara. Namo Buddha Publications, 2011.

Transcending Ego: Distinguishing Consciousness from Wisdom. This book, which includes the original text of the Third Karmapa and Thrangu Rinpoche’s commentary, describes in detail the eight consciousnesses and how these transform into the five wisdoms at enlightenment. Namo Buddha Publications, 2001.

The Practice of Tranquillity and Insight. This book is a practical guide to the two types of meditation that form the core of Buddhist spiritual practice. Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1993

The King of Samadhi. This book is a commentary on the only sutra of the Buddha that discusses Mahamudra meditation. It is also the sutra that predicted the coming of Gampopa. Rangjung Yeshe Publications, 1994.

The Songs of Naropa. This book tells the story of the life of Naropa and analyzes in detail his famous Summary of Mahamudra which lays out the path of Mahamudra meditation by the guru whose succession of students went on to found the Kagyu lineage. Rangjung Yeshe Publications, 1997.

Shentong and Rangtong. The teachings on emptiness divided into two divisions in Tibet—Rangtong, which followed Nagarjuna closely and Shentong, which followed the third turning closely. Namo Buddha Publications, 2011.

For all of Rinpoche’s books see www.namobuddhapub.com
**The Bibliography**

**Sutras**

*The Questions of King Melinda* from the Pali text.

The sutra describes an encounter between the Greek Bactrian King and a yogi named Nagasena. This is translated in Max Müller’s *The Sacred Books of the East*.

**Shastras and other texts**

**Aryadeva**

*Treatise of Four Hundred Stanzas* (Skt. *Catu-shatakashastra-karika*).

This treatise can be found in the Tengyur. Aryadeva was Nagarjuna’s closest disciple and this work is an important exposition of the Madhyamaka. It has been translated as *Aryadeva’s Four Hundred Stanzas on the Middle Way* by Ruth Sonam (Snow Lion Publications, 2008).

**Brunnholzl, Karl**


A detailed description of the Middle-way from the point of view of the Kagyu lineage, emphasizing the Shentong tradition.

**Chandrakirti**

*Introduction to the Middle Way* (Skt. *Madhyamaka-vatara*).

One of the most celebrated Indian works on the study of emptiness written in verse in ten chapters with each chapter corresponding to a bodhisattva level. It was written to supplement Nagarjuna’s *Prajnanama-mula-madhyamaka-karika* and is considered the principle text of the Madhyamaka Prasangika view.

This treatise has been translated with Mipham’s commentary on it by the Padmakara Translation Group as *Introduction to the Middle Way* (Shambhala, 2002).

**Dowman, Keith**


A translation of the Tibetan text which gives the lives of the eighty-four mahasiddhas who all achieved awakening by practicing Mahamudra.

**Hookham, S. K.**


This book is an extensive analysis of Buddha-nature and discusses the Rangtong and Shentong position. It also gives a translation of Jamgon Kongtrul’s commentary on the *Uttaratantra*.

**Jnanagarbha**

*Differentiation of the Two Truths* (Skt. *Madhyamaka-satyadvaya-karika*).

The classic text on distinguishing conventional from ultimate truth. It has been translated as *Commentary on the Distinction between Two Truths of the Middle Way* by Malcolm David Eckel, (SUNY Press, 1987).

**Maitreya**
Differentiation of the Middle Way from the Extremes (Skt. Madhyanta-vibhanga)
A treatise elucidating what is empty and what is not empty.

Ornament for the Mahayana Sutras (Skt. Mahayana-sutralamkara)
This text gathers together a vast array of Mahayana sutras and explains them very extensively. It has not been translated into English.

The Uttaratantra Shastra (Skt. Mahayana-tantra-shastra)
This text describes Buddha-nature in seven chapters and outlines the arguments of the third turning of the wheel of dharma. Translated by Katia and Ken Holmes with a commentary by Thrangu Rinpoche as The Uttaratantra: A Treatise on Buddha Essence (Zhyisil Chokyi Ghatsal Publications, 2004).

Ornament of Clear Realization (Skt. Abhisamaya-lakara)
A description of the ten bodhisattva levels and the five paths. Published with a commentary by Thrangu Rinpoche as The Ornament of Clear Realization (Zhyisil Chokyi Ghatsal Publications, 2005).

The Differentiation of Dharma from Dharmata
This text describes the characteristics of dharmata or “pure being” and contrasts it to dharma or phenomenal existence. Published with a commentary by Thrangu Rinpoche as Distinguishing Dharma & Dharmata (Zhyisil Chokyi Ghatsal Publications, 2004).

Mipham Rinpoche
Gateway to Knowledge (Tib. mkhas pa’i tshul la jug pa’i sgo zhes bya ba’i bstan bcos bzhugs so)
This large ten-volume text is a great compendium of knowledge. The first three volumes have been translated by Erik Pema Kunsang in Gateway to Knowledge (Rangjung Yeshe Publications).

Nagarjuna
Treatise on the Middle Way (Skt. Prajnana-mamula-madhya-maka-karika)
This treatise is found in the Tengyur. It is the foundation of the Madhyamaka school and has been translated by F. J. Streng in his Emptiness: A Study in Religious Meaning (Abingdon Press, 1967).

Santina, Peter Della
Madhyamaka Schools in India, (Motilal Banarsidass, 1986)
A book that traces the Middle-way philosophy from its beginnings in India through to the differences between the Prasangika and Svatantrika schools.

Shantarakshita
Ornament of the Middle Way (Skt. Madhyama-lamkara)
This text can be found in the Tengyur. It has been translated into English by the Padmakara Translation Group as The Adornment of the Middle Way: Shantarakshita’s Madhyama-lankara with Commentary by Jamgon Mipham by James Blumenthal (Shambhala, 2005).

Thrangu Rinpoche
The Essentials of Mahamudra: Looking Directly at the Mind (Shambhala, 2004).
This book covers Rinpoche’s five-year commentary on the *Moonlight of Mahamudra* by Tashi Namgyal. 


A commentary on the Third Karmapa’s short treatise on the eight consciousnesses that turn into the five wisdoms upon reaching enlightenment.

**Vasubandhu**

*Compendium of Knowledge* (Skt. *Abhidharma-samuccaya*).

This work is a summary of the vast Abhidharma literature and is still used in Tibet today to study this complex subject. It is found in the Tengyur.

**Williams, Paul**


A detailed survey of Mahayana Buddhism.
About the Author

The Very Venerable Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche was born in Kham in 1933. At the age of five he was formally recognized by the Sixteenth Karmapa and the previous Situ Rinpoche as the ninth incarnation of the great Thrangu tulku. Entering Thrangu monastery, from the ages of seven to sixteen he studied reading, writing, grammar, poetry, and astrology, memorized ritual texts, and completed two preliminary retreats. At sixteen, under the direction of Khenpo Lodro Rabsel, he began the study of the three vehicles of Buddhism while staying in retreat.

At twenty-three Rinpoche received full ordination from the Karmapa. When he was twenty-seven he left Tibet for India at the time of the Communist military takeover. He was called to Rumtek, Sikkim where the Karmapa had his seat in exile. At thirty-five Rinpoche took the geshe examination before 1500 monks at Buxador monastic refugee camp in Bengal and was awarded the degree of Geshe Lharampa. On his return to Rumtek he was named Abbot of Rumtek monastery and the Nalanda Institute for Higher Buddhist studies at Rumtek. He has been the personal teacher of the four principal Karma Kagyu tulkus: Shamar Rinpoche, Situ Rinpoche, Jamgon Kongtrul Rinpoche, and Gyaltsab Rinpoche.

Thrangu Rinpoche has centers in Asia, Europe, and North America and has traveled extensively throughout the world to teach. In 1984 he spent several months in Tibet where he ordained over 100 monks and nuns and visited several monasteries. In Nepal, Rinpoche founded the Thrangu Tashi Choling monastery and the Shree Mangal Dvip boarding school, for the general education of lay children and young monks, in Boudha; Thrangu Tara Abbey, a monastic college for nuns, in Swayambhunath; the Thrangu Tashi Yangtse monastic college, retreat center and medical clinic at Namo Buddha, east of the Kathmandu Valley; and the Thrangu Shekhar retreat center in Bhaktapur, just below a cave where Tibetan yogi Milarepa practiced. He has completed the Vajra Vidya monastic college near Deer Park in Sarnath, India, where Shakyamuni Buddha gave his first teaching on the Four Noble Truths. In North America Rinpoche is the abbot of Gampo Abbey, Nova Scotia, Canada and has established the Thrangu monastery in Vancouver, B.C., Canada and the Vajra Vidya retreat center in Crestone, Colorado, USA.

Thrangu Rinpoche is one of the most highly regarded masters of Mahamudra meditation. He has touched the lives of students from all parts of the world through his compassionate presence, his immense knowledge, and his way of making even complex teachings attainable. Because of his vast knowledge of the Dharma he has been appointed by His Holiness the Dalai Lama to be the personal tutor for the Seventeenth Gyalwang Karmapa.

For more information about Thrangu Rinpoche’s life and activities please see www.rinpoche.com.

Thrangu Rinpoche’s books are available in print at www.namobuddhapub.com.

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