

# Varieties of Buddhist Experience and Quantum Emptiness

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## **Ontological Extremism, a Middle Way, and the Light of the Mind.**

In Buddhism the *Abhidharma* of the *Sarvastivada* and *Vaibhashika* Schools, along with Democritus and his master Leucippus, and Western functionalist Material Realism (Scientific Realism/Scientific Materialism), all hold the realist atomist position wherein reality consists of indivisible, physical/material atomic matter particles (atomism) that have an ultimately physical, objectively real, permanent, even absolute and eternal existence. This is the ontology of Physicalism.

So some Buddhist schools believe that atoms are eternal; and some particle physicists believe that electrons and protons within these atoms are eternal, that they do not decay. In the case of recent particle physics, the existence of ordinary atomic baryonic matter (our beloved protons and neutrons) is believed to be independently arising from the “empty space” of the quantum vacuum potential, apart from any perceiving, experiencing, experimenting consciousness, or mind. Such realists, whether Buddhists, Hindus or physicists, are *essentialists*, believing that reality exists essentially and *independently*—just as it appears from its own side, of its own power—not *interdependently* as centrist *Madhyamaka* Buddhists would have it.

The essentialist view is *observer-independent*. The world of stuff is a separate “real world out there” (RWOT), whether or not it’s observed by a sentient consciousness. The Middle Way *Madhyamaka* view is *observer-dependent* or ontologically relative (relative to our linguistic semiotic deep cultural background “web of belief”). For this view, stuff exists not independently, but relative to the consciousness of an observer/perceiver.

On the essentialist, usually realist and materialist/physicalist view, reality as it appears to our senses is a perfect “mirror of nature” (Rorty), a kind

of “immaculate perception” that represents an eternal barrier between inherently unitary human consciousness and an essentially separate Platonic RWOT. This observer-independent, theory-independent, realist/materialist view is opposed by the epistemological idealism of the Hindu *Sanatanadharma*—the hoary old Vedas, the Upanashads, and the dualistic Vedanta of Madhva’s *Dvaita Vedanta*. It is also opposed by Buddhist Idealists, the *Yogachara/Chittamatra* or “Mind Only” school of Asanga and Vasubandhu, and as well by Western Objective Idealists—Bradley, Royce, McTaggart—who broadly construe arising material objective reality as unreal, a subjective apparition or illusion of a sober, sentient perceiving consciousness.

For *Chittamatra* Idealism, appearing relative-conventional physical spacetime reality is relative and illusory (*avidya maya*) as it arises from our *concept* of its basal nondual ultimate source or “groundless ground” (*vidya maya*).

For Middle Way *Madhyamaka Prasangika* Realism, both form and emptiness are mere illusory *concepts*. As Shakyamuni Buddha told in his nondual *Heart Sutra*: “Form is empty (*stong pa, shunya*) ; emptiness (*stong pa nyi, shunyata*) is form...all dharmas are emptiness; there are no characteristics. There is no birth and no cessation...in emptiness there is no form...no ignorance, no end of ignorance...no path, no wisdom, no enlightenment, and no non-enlightenment...”

Well, ontologically speaking, what *is* there then? What indeed? Buddha asks us to “abide by means of *Prajnaparamita*”, bright indwelling *presence*, always already present primordial wisdom, and thereby “fully awaken to unsurpassed, true, complete enlightenment”. And yes, it takes a bit of trans-conceptual practice to understand the prior ontic unity of the epistemic Two Truths—relative and ultimate—as utterly empty of essence; or as Nagarjuna told, without “a shred of inherent existence”.

And for *Chittamatra*, this appearing phenomenal reality is “mind only.” There can be no objectively knowable real things in themselves. Yet for realistic *Prasangika*, spacetime phenomena do indeed exist relatively, conventionally, just not absolutely or ultimately. This then is the

great *Madhyamaka* Middle Way, a fine balance between the non-existence of idealistic nihilism, and the permanence of realist existence.

Kant's Transcendental Subjective Idealism—a duality of realist, material objective *phenomena*, and the perfectly subjective and unknowable, utterly transcendent *noumenon*—is a Western (Platonist) version of our Primordial Wisdom Tradition's "Two Truths" duality—objective relative and subjective ultimate—and parallels the "Neutral Monism" of William James. Kant's incipient middle way idealism also parallels the non-essentialist, yet pragmatically realist centrist Buddhist Middle

Way *Madhyamaka Prasangika* view of Nagarjuna and Chandrakirti. Here reality arises and appears interdependently (Buddha's "Dependent Arising" (*pratitya samutpada*), is ontologically relative and observer-dependent, that is to say, our realities are dependent upon the semiotic "web of belief" (Quine 1969) of the consciousness of a reflexively self-conscious observer, as we have just seen.

Is such a middle way between these perennial Two Truths of relative form and ultimate emptiness/boundlessness cognitively realizable? Is there a centrist position between our seemingly competing paradigms, the epistemic extremes of descending, substantialist, objective Science (form) and the ascending idealism of subjective Spirituality (emptiness)?

*Yes. Between these two philosophical extremes—the realist/materialist reification of a permanent, absolute, substantial, eternal and independently existing physical and mental phenomenal reality "out there", and the idealist nihilistic negation of it—abides the mean that is the Prasangika Madhyamaka, the centrist, Nalanda Buddhist Middle Way Consequence School (H.H. The Dalai Lama 2009).*

*Prasangika* is the complementary theoretical basis, according to Longchen Rabjam (2007), and His Holiness the Dalai Lama (2009) of the utterly nondual view and praxis of Buddhist *Nyingma* School's *Dzogchen*, the Great Perfection, that acausal, trans-conceptual "correction" or completion of the inherent duality of Middle Way *Prasangika*, and indeed of the entire great Buddhist Causal Vehicle (Klein 2006; Boaz 2015). Indeed, His Holiness advises that *Prasangika* is the Middle Way foundation of the great nondual *Dzogchen* teaching (2009).

Thus, in *Dzogchen* we have not only a centrist *Prasangika* synthesis of the Two Truths—relative and ultimate—that are exoteric Realism/Materialism (matter), and esoteric Idealism (mind/spirit), but an optimistic and freeing soteriology—an “innermost secret” or greater esoteric view and praxis for an expedited human liberation/enlightenment, ultimate happiness itself. Indeed, this is the happiness that cannot be lost. We cannot *become* happy or enlightened in the future; we can only *be* happy here now. Why? Wonder of wonders, as *Dzogchen* founder Garab Dorje told, “It is already accomplished from the very beginning”, deep within us. And 500 years before, Shakyamuni Buddha told: “Let it be as it is and rest your weary mind, all things are perfect exactly as they are”.

Leibnitz’ view of such a perfect “best of all possible worlds”; and recent cosmology’s tautological but non-trivial Anthropic Principle (both weak and strong versions), point out that our unlikely universe with its highly improbable super-“fine-tuned” physical constants that favor life forms must necessarily exist in order that human consciousness arise to reflexively observe and ponder it all. Both Leibnitz and the Anthropic Principle suggest that a non dual noetic (no *essential* subject-object separation) view of this otherwise ineffable perfect subjectivity is necessary in order to understand it.

On the accord of Buddhist Vajrayana epistemology, this perfect understanding is Buddha mind (*samatajnana*), the Great Perfection of *Dzogchen*, the mind of Ultimate Truth. Indeed, this is the very nature of mind. And that is who we actually are. Heady wine indeed to dualistic concept mind ensnared as it is in the prodigious quest for absolute objective certainty within this dimension of merely realist/materialist “concealer” Relative Truth.

It is perhaps a bit sobering to remember that all of this heady conjecture is but self-stimulating concept mind. Yet, there is this unreasonable brightness of the mind that is always present.

“Everything that exists lacks an intrinsic nature or identity” asserts Alan Wallace (2003) explicating Nagarjuna’s Buddhist selfless (*anatman*) centrist *Madhyamaka* ontology. The appearance of objects arising from the basal primordial ground (the unbounded whole or *mahabindu*,

*dharmakaya, chittadhatu*) are interdependently related, that is, their reality is dependent upon other related events and processes in a vast matrix of “prior causes and conditions.”

Moreover, human discursive mind conceptually imputes, designates, then reifies these appearances into independent, objectively “real” physical/mental/emotional spacetime existent realities in accordance with our atavistic, deep background cultural assumptions. Thus arises what WVO Quine (1969) terms our socio-cultural “web of belief”, the cause of it all.

We then habitually reduce our bright subjectively real original noetic direct experience to objectified discursive cognitive entities abiding in an emblematic, seemingly separate “real world out there”. With a bit of mindfulness practice we may learn to *choose our reality*; that is, we learn to maintain the initial nondual noetic purity of our basal primordial wisdom ground as it arises spontaneously through ordinary direct perception, prior to conceptual intervention and judgment. With a bit more practice we can do this simultaneously with our parallel conceptual dualistic relative-conventional dimension of a RWOT.

So we live in these two worlds—objective real/material, and subjective mental/spiritual—at once; whether we are cognizant of this unity, or not. Is not our soteriological imperative the recognition, realization then compassionate expression of the prior unity of these two? To reduce or not to reduce, that is the epistemic question of nondual enlightened awareness. Hence, from the epistemology you choose, arises the ontology you deserve.

**The Two Truths and Dōgen’s Being-time.** Dōgen, perhaps Japan’s greatest Zen master, spoke of this arising, descending dimension of relative time and its phenomenal contents—the spacetime dimension of Relative Truth (*samvriti satya*)—as “a being-time moment flashing into existence” from the vast spacious expanse of the basal, non-logocentric primordial emptiness (*shunyata*) base or ground that is nondual reality being itself—the all-embracing dimension of Ultimate Truth (*paramartha satya*).

This “ultimate truth” or unbounded whole is nothing less than his *Ugi*, or Being-Time. Dōgen’s *Ugi* is the here now, always already present unity of the Buddhist *Madhyamaka* “three times” — past, present, future. So there is no beginning, and no end to this vast expanse of reality itself. The dimension of spacetime Relative Truth, including us, instantiates this vast primordial “groundless ground” of everything that arises and appears to sentient consciousness. Yes, we are luminous primordial awareness instantiations of *That(tat)*. Human consciousness necessarily intends *That*. However, for Dōgen (and Padmasambhava), the eternal present exists for us only relative to a past and a future. Being-Time/*Ugi* is a simultaneous array of all three. Thus we live in a single vanishing instant now. Yet, this precious moment now, derives its meaning from the inter-subjective context of a personal and even collective past, and of a future. This momentous moment now is significant because all of our past and future are interdependently, causally enfolded within it, while always unfolding in the timeless continuum of this present now. Yes, we live in the moment, but not only in the moment. To live only in the moment now, without awareness of past and future (karma) is to “make our life meaningless”. Not to live in the moment now, is “to lose reality itself” (Boaz 2015). Philosophers of physics and cosmology, if not always physicists and cosmologists, are now discovering a post empirical *kosmic* being-time in Dōgen Zenji’s syncretic view of the prior epistemic unity of our two faces— objective and subjective—of this inherently reflexive consciousness, an unbounded whole (*mahabindu*) that is reality being itself, the very nature of mind, and our actual “supreme identity”.

Dōgen’s great insight is that prior to the superimposition (*vikshepa*) and intervention of conceptual cognition, ordinary direct perception bestows the inherent (*sahaja*), immediate, luminous, “primordially pure” noetic nature of mind, the ultimate ground of all our relative conventional experience. Here, in the “bare attention” of basal “naked awareness” — ontologically prior to subject/object separation and habitual conceptual imputation and reification— abides trans-rational nondual noetic reality itself. This pristine awareness is our very aperture to that primordial

wisdom ground. And as Buddha reminds us, everything arising therein is “perfect as it is”. Heady wine indeed.

Such immediate perception, an instant prior to conception, is pure perception. And we all do this, all the time, with every perception! Wonder of wonders, we are all “primordially awakened” (*bodhi, vidya*) to this always “already accomplished” innate and perfect clearlight mind. That is our actual “supreme identity”. The rub? We must recognize, realize and awaken (*bodhi*) to this great “perfectly subjective” truth. How do we do this? We consult the experts and follow their injunctions, of course. As H.H. The Dalai Lama (2009) told, “The clearlight mind which lies dormant in human beings is the great hope of humankind”.

Hence, there is always, through all of our cognitive states—perceptual, conceptual, emotional, and trans-conceptual contemplative—an ontic prior unity of past, present, future, always being here now. We can learn to be present to the nondual noetic *presence* of That. And yes it takes a little transpersonal mindfulness (*shamatha/vipashyana*) contemplative practice. Who am I? As Buddha told, “Don’t believe what I teach, but come and see”.

**Toward an Integral Noetic Science of Matter, Mind and Spirit.** Physics and cosmology are quantitative. “The qualitative” (value, volition) is active yet largely suppressed and denied in the common orthodoxy of the physical sciences. Let us now recognize and strategically develop the qualitative dimension in science.

*What is urgently required is an integral noetic ontology and a centrist epistemology and methodology that accounts for a trans-rational, yet contemplatively knowable subjective ultimate or universal trans-physical reality matrix emptiness base or “groundless ground”—the unbounded whole and “supreme source” of our wisdom traditions—in which objective physical relative spacetime particulars (energy, mass, force, charge, waves, particles and people) arise, interact and participate. The prior ontic unity that is this great whole subsumes yet embraces its parts, while the parts participate in the whole.*

Clearly, such a noetic science requires a methodological, “post empirical” relaxing of the limits of the obsessively objective positivist view and praxis that is the “old paradigm” Scientific Realism and Scientific Materialism. Such a Kuhnian scientific revolution is now upon us (Boaz 2015).

The basal quantum vacuum energy (dark energy, Einstein’s cosmological constant  $\Lambda$ ) of Quantum Cosmology, with parallel Buddhist openness/emptiness (*shunyata/dharmakaya/kadag*) in which this energy vacuum arises, is a good beginning. This of course requires noetic contemplative research methodologies that utilize both quantitative objective third person data sets, and the qualitative, though still objective data sets of personal, subjective, introspective, even contemplative first person reports (Boaz 2015).

The Copenhagen Interpretation of Relativistic Quantum Field Theory (QFT); Stephen Hawking’s recent Model Dependent Realism (MDR) view of QFT; Dirac’s unification of Einstein’s Special Relativity with Bohr’s early quantum theory, that resulted in—yes, QFT; and the new Quantum Bayesianism (QBism) interpretations of QFT—these are Science’s inchoate acausal cognitive architecture for such a middle way centrist (between the epistemic extremes of permanent existence and nihilistic non-existence) methodology.

The challenge is this: that greatest of human intellectual achievements, the prodigious Standard Model of particles and forces, with its Standard Model of Cosmology ( $\Lambda$ CDM) still clings to the orthodox, old paradigm dogmatic metaphysic of extreme objectivist Realism/Physicalism/Materialism of a classical Newtonian cosmos of real objects permanently and eternally existing in an absolute, objectively real time. Einstein’s still classical (non-quantum) General Relativity has changed gravity a bit. Kuhnian scientific revolution or no, what has not changed much is science’s cultural zeitgeist, classical, objectivist Platonic Scientific Realism, nor realism’s epistemic handmaid, monistic physicalist Scientific Materialism, or worse, fundamentalist Scientism. Notable exceptions to this unwholesome course may be the antirealist, ontologically relative quantum views of Bohr, von Neumann, Wheeler and Barbour.



Of the many physicists and cosmologists in recovery from this afflictive obsessive physicalist/materialist view, relativistic physicist and cosmologist Stephen Hawking's story is perhaps the most inspiring. The epistemic reversal of his hitherto Scientific Realism of *A Brief History of Time*, became an ever so reticent antirealist Model Dependent Realism (MDR) view revealed in his recent excellent book, *The Grand Design*(2010). Such rare intellectual openness and honesty in a great mind is indeed a joy to behold. What might the culture of old paradigm Modern Standard Model physics and cosmology, and post-Standard Model (Supersymmetry/M Theory, Multiverse Theory, the dark sector) look like with this methodological enrichment of the psychology, ontology and epistemology of Premodern—and now, with the mindfulness revolution in the West—Postmodern Buddhist Middle Way contemplative science? Let particle physicists, cosmologists, neuroscientists and Buddhist scholar-practitioners dialogue over tea and pizza.

There is now in the West an auspicious, inchoate union of Buddhism and science arising. This unified integral noetic ontology, with its emerging science of consciousness, presents a propitious opening for the new noetic science of matter, mind and spirit of our emerging Noetic Revolution; and the healing wisdom that abides therein (Boaz 2015).

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