

# The Four Buddhist Tenet Systems: Variations on a Theme of Wholeness

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First, a brief prelude. The roughly 6000 year old philosophical, religious, and spiritual history of our species—in both the East, and much later in the West—has been concerned with understanding the apparent, usually obvious truth that things are not as they appear. Physicists, neurobiologists, social scientists, and psychologists all agree, physical and mental spacetime reality arising to human sensory perception and mental conception are in one way or another deceptive. Twentieth and 21st century physics and cosmology further thickens this quantum entangled plot. We need a skillful means for handling the cognitive confusion that here arises—for both Science and Spirit.

We urgently require both objective conceptual, and subjective non-conceptual, contemplative cognitive strategies for ascertaining what is apparently, relatively, conventionally real and existent; and what exists ultimately, even spiritually, beyond our obvious apparent realities. Viewed holistically, the question becomes: what is our human relationship to the vast ultimate boundless whole in which, or in whom this all arises. Are we separate from That; or somehow unified in it? Or something in between? And in any case, how is it so?

In the East, pre-Vedic contemplative religious-philosophical practice arose in the Indus Valley at least 6000 years ago; although the earliest traces of proto-Hindu deities are found in Bhimbetka rock paintings and carvings dating to 30,000 BCE, or older!

Gautama Shakyamuni the Buddha, the Buddha of this present age, arose in Northeastern India at the end the Vedic period, in the late 5th century. He studied with at least three Hindu Vedic masters, and became an adept of Vedic and Upanishadic contemplative praxis. Upon his full *bodhi* awakening Buddha became clear as to the ultimate ontological unity of the Two Truths—relative spacetime form, and its ultimate emptiness. He then formulated his early teaching in response to his Hindu Sanatana Dharma previous teaching. He adopted many Vedic terms and some of its teaching, including cause and effect human action or karma, and *ahimsa* (do no harm to living beings), both of which he adapted to his own Buddhadharma teaching.

The epithet "Buddha" appeared in early Hindu scripture to refer to Vedic deities. Other Buddhist symbols and terms that began in the Hindu Sanatana Dharma include the *dharma chakra* (which appears on the state flag of India), *mudra*, *rudraksha* or mala prayer beads, mantra, yoga, *dukkha* or suffering, *dhyana* or meditation, *nirvana*, *moksha*, *nirodha*, *klesha*, *prajna*, *maitri*, *chakras*, *nadis* or energy channels, *tummo* prana energy or *kundalini*, and many more. Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path shares several practice ideals with the Hindu Yoga tradition, and valorizes many Hindu saints.

What the Buddha did not accept from the Hindu Sanatana Dharma was the Hindu theistic Absolute Nirguna Brahman/Parabrahman creator God, nor its permanent, eternal Atman Soul Self as liberators of human suffering. Indeed, as we have seen, utter selflessness or *anatman* was to become, with *shunyata*/emptiness, and dependent arising, his three primary philosophical teaching principles. As to the Buddha's ethics, altruistic *bodhicitta*—the thought, intention, and action for the benefit of living beings—was his primary ethical principal.

The teaching of the Buddha is thoroughly non-theistic. The Vajrayana's Primordial *Adi* Buddha Samantabhadra, Buddha of formless ultimate *dharmakaya* dimension, is according to recent Tibetan *Dzogchen* master Tulku Urygen Rinpoche, a Buddhist *non-theistic, quasi-creator* God.

Buddha frequently references in the sutra texts, Vedic deities and the great Hindu *rishi* masters as buddhadharma protectors. Buddha also repudiated the Hindu caste system, and the

denigration of women. Buddha emphasized not belief and faith in his dharma teaching, but the attitude of *ehi-passika*, "come and see". "O monks (and nuns), do not believe what I teach out of respect for me. Come and see for yourselves". Direct knowledge and wisdom (*yogi pratyaksa*), and compassionate *bodhicitta* aspiration and action is emphasized over concept, faith, and belief in the Buddha's teaching.

Although the early Upanishads were extant in the Buddha's time, Hinayana *Pali Canon* texts do not mention them. However, early Buddhist texts do refer to the Brahmas, and entry into the ultimate dimension of Brahma may result from Buddhist meditation practice. In the *Pali Canon Digha Nikaya*, "union with Brahma" is seen as liberation. Buddha states that a true Hindu Brahmin is not merely defined as one of the highest caste, but a Buddhist *Arhat*, the result of meditation accomplishment.

Still, the Buddha is critical of the notion of Brahman the Absolute as "permanent and eternal". Told the Buddha, "Truly the Baka Brahma is steeped in non-wisdom". The Atman Self that is one with Brahman is replaced by Buddha's *anatman* or no-self, and *anitya*, or impermanence.

In the *Khandha Samyutta* (47) (*Pali Canon*), all concepts, beliefs, and assumptions—conscious or unconscious regarding self (*atman*), and an ego (*ahamkara*)—are reducible to one or more of the five aggregates/*skandhas*, and are thus impermanent (*anitya*), and absent and empty (*shunya*) of any whit of intrinsic ultimate existence (*svabhava*). Indeed, it is persistent ego desire with its deep cultural background assumption of a real permanent self-ego-I that dooms human being to near endless *kalpas* of cyclic existence, precluding awakening/liberation during those intervals of being.

Finally, the Buddha did not accept the overall absolutist philosophical position of the Vedas and the Upanishads ("the end of the Vedas"). That said, nondual Advaita Vedanta of Adi Shankara (8th century CE), who argued against Buddha's *anatman* no-self in favor of the Atman Self, parallels later nondual Buddhist *Dzogchen* teaching to a surprising degree (*Ch. VIII*).

A word on Buddhist hermeneutics or conceptual interpretation, vis-à-vis deeper trans-conceptual, contemplative understanding is here in order. Let's use a pithy example. The justly famous Upanishadic pith, "*Tat Tvam Asi*" (That Thou Art, or That I Am) is refuted in several early Buddhist sutras as affirming a kind of permanent Vedic *Kosmic* Soul Self or Atman "higher self" essence. In the Judaic Christian tradition Jesus the Christ speaks of himself as the "I Am That I Am" Presence of Moses and the Prophets—a parallel view.

However, as we have so often seen in these pages, the truth of the matter so often depends upon the view—exoteric, conceptual, relative; or esoteric, contemplative, ultimate—or perhaps even a middle way. The Buddha's early *Pali Canon* critique of Vedic/Upanishadic ontology and praxis is generally directed toward a conceptual, relative view of external, exoteric and internal esoteric self-existence—in short, an Atman Self, in one of its deceptive metaphysical cloaks.

Just so, from the innermost esoteric or "innermost secret" nondual view of Buddha's much later subtlest or "highest" teaching—*Dzogchen Ati Yoga—Tat Tvam Asi* does not intend a *relative* existing self at all. Rather, it intends or points to the nondual luminous clear light state of selfless Samantabhadra, *ultimate* Supreme Source (*Kunjed gyalpo*) that is not other than our *buddic* "supreme identity"—bright Presence of That.

Therefore, on the nondual Buddhist view, the subtle referent of "*Tat-That*" in *Tat Tvam Asi* is the utterly selfless (*anatman*) nondual Buddha nature of mind—*tathata*, *tathagatagarbha*—perfectly subjective Buddha mind (*buddhajnana*) Presence (*vidya*, *rigpa*) of the vast expanse of boundless whole itself, primordial emptiness ground of *Perfect Sphere of Dzogchen*, wholly beyond our

conceptually imputed ideas *about* any of it. This of course is the contemplative, trans-conceptual, nonlocal, nondual ultimate view—"gone utterly beyond" (*parasamgate*) our concepts and beliefs *about* self and phenomena. This selfless "I Am" Presence is experienced directly (*yogi pratyaksa*), just as it is, prior to conceptualizing it. (*Dzogchen Ch. VIII*)

It's wise and good to remain closely connected and cognitively present to our all-embracing, always already present nondual primordial wisdom mind (*jnana, yeshe*) as we presume to critique non-Buddhist views; and as we conceptually elaborate the Buddha's prodigious teaching, both relative and ultimate.

We are so habituated to common conceptual thinking about our appearing realities that we tend to conflate thoughts with subtler, trans-conceptual, even nondual modes of human cognition, unwittingly reducing such clarity to mere perceiving and thinking cognitive modes. This higher human functioning remains an "undiscovered land", until we come to know it through non-conceptual contemplative practice, and selfless *bodhicitta*—the open secret of human happiness. That was Gautama the Buddha's great gift to all of us.

From the *Majjhima Nikaya sutta*: "The wise do not come to the conclusion: This alone is Truth, and everything else is false". Elsewhere Buddha says, "To attach to one view, and belittle other views as inferior is not wisdom". Good to know when deciding which views are "definitive", and which views we find inferior.

Thus did Gautama the Buddha teach in these "two ways at once"—exoteric relative, and esoteric ultimate—depending upon the capacity of his listener. We are well advised to consider this pragmatic relative truth when engaging the greater, subtler dimensions of his teaching.

As to meditation and liberation, Buddha enhanced the centuries old practices of the Upanishads and Vedas with the practice of mindful *shamatha (sati)*, calm abiding. In the Vedic tradition the Hindu sage is finally liberated, after a life of meditation, at death. In Buddhism the sage is liberated through the contemplative, compassionate life that he or she lives well. The Hindu Brahminic sage enters nondual *moksha/nirvana*/liberation at death. The Buddhist sage enters nondual *nirvanic* liberation during life. That said, let's engage the Buddhist philosophical systems.

**The Four Buddhist Tenet Systems.** Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche (2001) teaches that Gautama the Buddha's foundational Two Truths—relative and ultimate—are best understood through the Three Teaching Vehicles (*yanas*), in the context of the Four Tenet Systems.

In brief, the three vehicles include the foundational Hinayana (Indian *Pali Canon*), the Indian Mahayana, and the Tibetan Vajrayana (Secret Mantra or Mantrayana) teaching vehicles. The Hinayana is the very Buddhist *teaching foundation* of all that was to come. It is decidedly not a "lesser vehicle".

Longchen Rabjam (Longchenpa), in his *Precious Treasury of Philosophical Systems*, most authoritatively articulates and critiques in great detail all four of the Buddhist tenet systems, and as well the five pre-Buddhist, and non-Buddhist Indian "spiritual approaches" that are founded in the Vedic Hindu Samkhya system. These include the Metaphysical Realism of Samkhya, Shaivite, Vishnavite, and Jain, and the Metaphysical Nihilism of Barhaspatya.

The main difference between non-Buddhist views and Buddhist views is the former's assertion of a truly existing individual self-ego-I. Buddhists posit the *relative* existence of a relative self acting in the world to benefit living beings, but denies that this self possesses any intrinsic ultimate existence. All four Buddhist philosophical systems share this view of *anatman*, the no-self of the individual. For 14th century *Dzogchen* Master Longchenpa:

A Buddhist is someone who holds the Three Jewels as sacred sources of refuge (both causal and fruitional refuge), and accepts the four axioms that define Buddhist doctrine...(these are) Everything compounded is impermanent; everything that is corruptible produces suffering; all phenomena are empty (selfless) and have no independent nature; and nirvana is the state of peace...My extensive analysis of (Buddhist) approaches has two parts: the cause-based dialectical (Mahayana) approaches, and the fruition-based secret mantra (Vajrayana) approach. (*Precious Treasury of Philosophical Systems*, trans. Richard Barron, Padma Publishing, 2007, p. 66)

The Four Buddhist Tenet Systems include 1) Indian Vaibhasika; 2) Sautrantika (Sutra), both included in the Hinayana teaching vehicle; 3) Indian Mahayana Chittamatra (Mind Only); and 4) Tibetan Middle Way Madhyamaka with its *Rangtong* and *Shentong* dialectics. So, tenet three belongs to the Mahayana teaching vehicle; tenet four to the Tibetan Vajrayana teaching vehicle.

All Four Buddhist Tenet systems share the foundational teaching of the Buddha as to *anatman* or selflessness/no-self; and the Four Noble Truths. Differences in interpretation arise as to the nature of *shunyata*/emptiness, and of our luminous clear light Buddha nature. What is the relationship of emptiness and Buddha nature? How does appearing reality *ultimately* exist? How does *shunyata*/emptiness itself exist? For Hinayana, Tenet 1)—Vaibhasika, and tenet 2) Sautrantika/Sutra—external objective reality truly exists. Spacetime stuff is ultimately real.

For Mahayana, Tenet 3)—Chittamatra, and Tibetan tenet 4) Middle Way Madhyamaka—appearing objective reality is utterly absent and empty of any whit of *ultimate* existence, though it does exist *relatively*, nominally, and conventionally. So we still have to show up for work, and be kind to living beings.

It is generally agreed among the Three Vehicles that the Hinayana represents the First Turning of Buddha's Dharma Wheel (*dharmachakra*), at the Deer Park in Sarnath; the Mahayana the Second Turning, at Vulture Peak; and the Tibetan Vajrayana with its Buddha nature, the Third Turning (*Ch. II*).

Now, each of these Four Tenet Systems has important sub-schools. A bit more detail shall aid our relative conceptual, and even our ultimate understanding.

**1. Vaibhashika.** The first of the Four Buddhist Tenet Systems, Vaibhasika (Sarvastivada), known as the Great Exposition or the Particularist school, includes the Hinayana Shravakayana, the Vehicle of the Listeners/Hearers and the Hinayana Pretyekabuddhayana, the Vehicle of the Solitary Buddhas who accomplish their Buddha gnosis "outside" the formal Shravakayana context.

Historically, Vaibhashika had 18 sub-schools. The only one now extant is Theravada, active throughout Southeast Asia; and alive and well in the United States as the Thai Forest Tradition, located in Escondido California. Theravada is Buddha's oldest teaching vehicle. Theravadins have preserved their great tradition in the ancient 1st century Indian *Pali Canon*.

Vaibhashika follows Vasubandu's *Abidharmakosha*. Their understanding of the Buddha's Two Truths is this: because both arising physical phenomena and the mental phenomena of mind are reducible to their constituent parts, they are relatively existent, but not ultimately existent. Well, what *is* ultimately existent? It is the fundamental atomic "partless particles" of matter that cannot be further divided.

As for mind, the real consists of the most minute indivisible *present* moment of mind, prior even to attentional/perceptual cognition. Past and future don't exist. The past is gone, but a present memory. The future has not yet arisen, but a present anticipation. Even this present instant is too brief to grasp, already "gone beyond". So, in Vaibhashika, and in *Dzogchen* we abide in the spacious emptiness of the Buddha nature of mind, "gone utterly beyond" (*parasamgate*) our relative names, concepts, and beliefs about it. We rest in the selfless, nameless, formless (*namarupa*) cognizant bright Buddha Presence of That. That is the nonlocal, nondual moment to moment non-meditation that pervades the Buddha's teaching tenet systems, from Vaibhashika to *Dzogchen*.

Vaibhashika reductionist "partless particles" maps nicely, if imperfectly, onto the 20th century scientific materialist view that is "scientific reductionism". With the advent and growth of non-objectivist quantum mechanics this old orthodoxy has evolved, and our Western physics and cosmology have matured. Yet, this waning reductionist, materialist view of Scientific Materialism still colonizes Western mind and culture (*Appendix B*).

Just so, the first three Buddhist Tenet Systems have evolved, over the course of 25 centuries, into Middle Way Madhyamaka—the Tibetan Vajrayana foundation of the teaching pinnacle that is *Dzogchen* and Essence *Mahamudra*.

#### Longchenpa's "Refutation of the Vaibhashika Position":

Vaibhashika "cannot be defended as correct for three reasons:  
the assertion that minute particles are ultimately real entities is untenable;  
the assertion that mind and mental states do not involve reflexive  
consciousness is untenable; and this system's position on distinct  
formative factors is untenable. (Longchenpa *Ibid.* 73)

**2. Sutra/Sautrantika.** There are two Hinayana sutra sub-schools—Followers of Scripture (Vasubandhu's *Abidharmakosha*), and Followers of Reasoning (Dharmakirti's *Seven Treatises on Valid Cognition*). Sutra school views Buddha's Two Truths as constituting the conventional reality of Relative Truth (*samvriti satya, kunzog denpa*), and the authentic reality of Ultimate Truth (*paramartha satya, don dam denpa*). Roughly, conceptual abstractions are mere relative truths absent and empty of true or ultimate existence. So, only appearing unique and independent *particular* objects that actually "perform a function" truly, ultimately exist.

For example, recall for a moment the beautiful bouquet of red roses that sits now on your dining room table. Then walk to the dining room and see, touch and smell the bouquet. What is the difference? Your memory of the bouquet is an example of an abstract universal. A "universal" is what "particular" things have in common, their qualities or characteristics. Universals are conceptual abstractions or abstract entities that may be exemplified and instantiated by an indefinite number of particular concrete things. Our memory of the roses on the dining room table, and all the roses of the three times share the *universal* that is "roseness". But only the *particular* roses on the dining room table perform the particular rose functions of aroma, redness, and being here now as *this* lovely bouquet of red roses.

So for Sutra/Sautrantika, abstract universals have no *ultimate* existence. It is only the present concrete functioning particulars that really exist. Thus, for Sutra, appearing particular objective spacetime phenomena ultimately exist! Universals are abstract conceptually reified imputations that are empty of any ultimate existence. Nonetheless, on the accord of Sautrantika, the primordially existent basis or ground in which, or in whom all this imputed spacetime stuff arises

is, by its very nondual nature inherently free of them. So, paradoxically it ultimately exists. (This is paradoxical to concept mind, but not to Buddha mind.)

And this apparent inconsistency introduces the atavistic, inherently vexing philosophical "problem of universals". Any relative deliberation about universals and particulars must confront the thorny problem of universals. For example, what is the ontic status of such Buddhist universals as Buddha nature, *dharmakaya*, *dharmadhatu*, primordial *Adi Buddha* Samantabhadra, and the rest? In Buddhist ontology the resolution arises in the context of the Two Truths—relative and ultimate—dominant trope.

Longchenpa's "Refutation of the Sautrantika Position". He lists six reasons for Sautrantika's untenability. These six refute the main assertions that:

external objects are ultimately real...that obvious forms of matter  
that manifest have the same nature as consciousness...it cannot  
be proved that there are objects that present sense data. (*Ibid.* 77)

This Sutra/Sautrantika view will evolve to ever greater clarity and acuity as we progress through the next two tenet systems, namely 3) Chittamatra (Mind Only), and 4) the centrist Madhyamaka or Middle Way of Yogachara Madhyamaka, and of Prasangika Madhyamaka ontologies and epistemologies. (Ontology is concepts about the ultimate nature of *being/ontos*); and epistemology is concepts about how we arrive at this ultimate *knowledge/episteme*).

**3. Chittamatra.** The Mahayana Chittamatra or Mind Only Buddhist tenet system also has two important sub-schools: Followers of Scripture, following Asanga's *Five Treatises on the Grounds*; and the Followers of Reasoning, who follow Dharmakirti's *Seven Treatises on Valid Cognition*.

Broadly construed, as to the Buddha's Two Truths, our first two Buddhist tenet systems, Hinayana Vaibhasika and Sutra/Sautrantika affirm the objective existence of appearing external objects, as we have seen. Spacetime stuff is inherently (*sahaja*) real and existent. For our third and fourth tenet systems—Chittamatra and Madhyamaka—such phenomena are inherently illusory and ultimately non-existent, wholly absent and empty (*shunya*) of ultimate existence, while still displaying to mind as a relatively and conventionally real self-ego-I, with its myriad interdependent phenomenal arising. Twenty-five centuries of Buddhist dialectical philosophy has proven to be relentlessly dynamical, to say the least.

All four of the Buddhist tenet systems agree on The Conduct—compassionate *bodhicitta*. But with the advent of the Mahayana tenet systems—Chittamatra and Middle Way Madhyamaka (Yogachara and Prasangika)—extreme differences began to arise as to the philosophical View of the Buddha's Two Truths.

"Chittamatrins hold that all that is knowable is subsumed under three headings: imputation, dependence, and the absolute" (Longchenpa). These constitute the Chittamatra Fourfold Nature of reality itself. There are five bases of knowledge: the bases of form, mind, mental states, situational "paradigms" which are variations on these three, and uncompounded phenomena. These five are expressed differently by the two Chittamatra sub-schools: those who consider consciousness to entail sense data (*hyle*), and those who deny sense data (*Ibid.* 87).

The mentalist, metaphysical idealist Chittamatra view, founded in the 4th century by Asanga and Vasubandu, is philosophically a Metaphysical Absolute Idealism. What is this extreme counter-intuitive view? From Jamgon Kongtrul Lodro Thaye, *Treasury of Knowledge*):

Perceived objects and perceiving subjects are mere appearance.  
Consciousness that is self-aware and empty of duality is genuine.  
This is the presentation of the Mind Only school.

Appearances are always deceptive, arising through the *process* of our habitual perceiving and thinking patterns. Through such valid reasoning cognition (*anumana pramana*) Chittamatra has established that the objects of objective reality do not ultimately exist; therefore perceiving subjects cannot ultimately exist. Reality—perceived object and perceiving subject—is absent and empty of either objective or subjective inherent existence. While the pernicious subject-object split is alive and well in the real world of Relative Truth, in the purity of the ultimate view it is illusory. So, we are well advised to stay present to the nondual view of Ultimate Truth and live in the prior perfectly subjective unity of all these diaphanous objects of our appearing, not so real RWOT (real world out there).

Therefore, for Chittamatra, only "self-aware", subject-object empty, nondual mind exists. All relative, dualistically appearing perceiving subjects, and their perceived objects, are but appearances in/of mind, with no genuine inherent or ultimate existence at all. Only "mind consciousness" itself that is self-aware and empty of the duality of perceiving subject and its perceived object is ultimately existent and genuinely real.

We shall see in a moment that for Tibetan Middle Way Prasangika Madhyamaka "self aware mind consciousness" may not be as so easily established by relative conceptual cognition.

In Chittamatra appearing reality exists relatively, but as mind only. Mind Only ultimately exists. Things and their perceiving subjects/selves exist not as subjects and their objects, but as a singular mental knowing *process*. Beyond this "self aware" Mind there exists no other reality.

Furthermore, illusory appearing reality arises and manifests from the formless dimension of the *alaya-vijnana*, the all-ground or "storehouse consciousness" (*akasha*) in which Chittamatra's Eight Consciousnesses are collected.

Whereas Sutra/Sautrantika sees arising phenomena of the Eight Consciousnesses as perceptual valid cognition (*pramana*), Chittamatra sees nothing outside the mind. Common sense naive realism, derived as it is from the sense consciousnesses, is deceived, invalid cognition.

Thus does Chittamatra divide all phenomena into the *Threefold Nature* or the *Three Natures*: *conceptual-imputed*, *dependent*, and absolute or *perfect-ultimate*. The conceptually imputed nature, and the dependent nature comprise the deceptive dimension of Buddha's Relative Truth whose essential nature is nothing less than the naturally luminous and perfectly established "perfect-ultimate nature"—*shunyata*/emptiness, the Buddha's Ultimate Truth, nondual Buddha nature (*tathagatagarbha*, *tathata*/thatness/suchness). Contemplative realization of the Mind Only perfect-ultimate nature is the full *bodhi* wisdom mind of liberation and enlightenment.

We shall see next that Chittamatra or Mind Only is the foundational metaphysical tenet for the Metaphysical Idealism of the Yogachara Madhyamaka third tenet system.

Longchenpa's "Refutation of the Chittamatra Position" (Longchenpa *op. cit.* 98). Both Chittamatra schools affirm 1) nondual consciousness is ultimately existent—there is no perception of a split between an object perceived and a perceiving subject; and 2) the appearance of raw sense data is either authentic, or it is false. However, both of these views demonstrate invalid cognition:

There is a fundamental contradiction in there being two factors—something to be conscious of and something conscious of it—in a single moment of a single cognitive act; it is also impossible for

consciousness to be reflexive...just as a sword is unable to cut itself...  
consciousness is unable...to be conscious of itself. (Longchenpa *op.cit.* 98)

Mahayana meditation (Chittamatra, Madhyamaka) begins with taking refuge in the Three Jewels, and arousing the wondrous altruistic *bodhicitta*—thought, intention, and action/conduct for the benefit of living beings.

So here and now, settle in to your mindful breath. Become pre-dialectally aware, just prior to any "single moment of a single cognitive act", non-conceptually, *directly*, meta-cognitively, reflexively aware of your present awareness—whatever arises from the outside, and from the inside. Notice that none of it has any solid existence. Observe the fluent, spacious emptiness of the whole shebang. Without thinking about it, open your heart and mind to the potential understanding that this absence or emptiness of the ultimate existence of the stuff of reality is the actual truth of the matter. Rest in That. Let it be as it is, without thinking about it. Feel That.

As conceptual thinking or feeling distractions naturally arise, label it all "distraction" and release it on the out breath; or let it drift by on the vast empty sky, like a cloud, leaving no trace. Return to the breath, again and again. Now, observe that your outer world and your inner world are only luminous empty mind. Directly experience That.

Stop reading and thinking and go ahead and do it now for two or three minutes, or more. Thus will you understand, and feel the still peace of Mahayana nondual luminous emptiness that is your actual Buddha nature, the very nature of mind, mostly beyond awareness of a perceiving subject observing a carnival-like display of separate objects.

That is nondual, perfectly subjective primordial awareness-consciousness itself that pervades all four of the Buddhist tenet systems. Bright *buddic* Presence of That (*tathata*). Such nondual *direct* yogic perception (*yogi pratyaksa*) abides beyond, or cognitively prior to Buddhist conceptual dialectics, or any other conceptual processing (*Appendix A*). What a relief it is. *Emaho!*

**4. Madhyamaka.** "The second major Mahayana tradition, the Madhyamaka, is the most sublimely profound secret found in the teaching of the Sage" (Longchenpa *Ibid.* 99).

This system acknowledges the five bases of the knowable, but these are subsumed within the two levels of truth (Buddha's Two Truths); therefore, the Madhyamikas say that all phenomena inherently lack any finite essence (*Ibid.* 99).

The Mahayana/Vajrayana Middle Way Madhyamaka's ontological reach extends even beyond that of mentalist Chittamatra, who have established that only "self-aware" consciousness—Mind Only—ultimately exists. For Madhyamaka, especially the *Rangtong* of Prasangika Madhyamaka, not even the entity, or process of a personal, or even a universal self-aware mind consciousness ultimately exists. Lustrous exemplars of this view are Rangtongpas Chandrakirti (*Madhyamakavatara*) and Shantideva (*Bodhicharyavatara*). For nondual self-aware, self-arising ultimate primordial wisdom (*yeshe*) of the luminous awareness-consciousness base or "groundless ground" (*gzhi rigpa*) we must refer to the nondual view of *Dzogchen*, or to the view of Essence *Mahamudra* (*Ch. VIII*).

Thus it is, all phenomena, outer objective, and inner subjective are essenceless, absent and empty of intrinsic or ultimate existence—nothing more nor less than the adventitious coalescence of utterly impermanent, interdependent relative-conventional causes and conditions (the effects of

prior causes). This process is the Buddha's interdependent arising (*pratitya samutpada*), wholly free of, and transcendent to any Hindu or Judaic-Christian theistic First Cause, or Creator God.

*The Buddha's Two Truths in Middle Way Madhyamaka*. Nagarjuna (d. 55 AD) teaches that:

The Dharma taught by the buddhas  
Depends entirely on two levels of truth:  
The relative truth of the world,  
And the truth that has ultimate meaning.

Longchenpa: "The knowable that manifests in myriad ways to a confused mind constitutes what is relative, whereas that which abides beyond any description, imagination, or expression whatsoever is classified as what is ultimate". Moreover, Relative Truth is twofold: "objects of flawed faculties, and objects of flawless faculties". The flawless faculties of all the buddhas do indeed experience relative spacetime reality flawlessly, as empty of any inherent existence.

The Prasangikas hold that the nature of the levels themselves, being emptiness, is beyond analysis. Emptiness is the basic space in which things manifest...  
If analysis were to conclude that these 'two levels of truth' are separate from one another, it would be mistaken. (Longchenpa *op. cit.* 116-117)

Thus are the Two Truths of the Buddha's teaching a prior and present perfect nondual unity, *one truth*, invariant through all human cognitive states—direct attention-perception; objective concept-belief; subjective meditation; and perfectly subjective nondual *buddhic* luminosity.

These two levels of truth can be validated by logic. It is logical that *dharmadhatu*, the basic space of phenomena, the ultimate level of truth is freedom from conceptual elaboration, because it is not the province of ordinary consciousness, which entails conceptual frameworks. (Ultimate Truth) is realized through nondual timeless awareness, in a way that involves no such elaboration (*Ibid.*)

How do we "put this understanding into practice"? While recognizing the wisdom of *shunyata*/emptiness, and arousing *bodhicitta*, the heartmind of enlightenment, the bodhisattva arises from nondual meditation and engages thought, intention, and action for the benefit of living beings in "post-meditation" relative conventional conduct. Thus are the Buddha's sublime philosophy, and the skillful means of ethical practice that arise there from, a lifeworld unity. Thus "one will finally attain the two sacred kayas of buddhahood: dharmakaya and rupakaya". This prior unity of primordial wisdom and compassion are the two limbs of the Buddha's sublime nondual teaching.

So here, "The ground aspect of Madhyamaka is subsumed within the two levels of truth; the path aspect, within twofold spiritual development; and the fruition aspect, within the two kayas" (*ibid.* 120). And this is the open secret of human happiness. *Mahasukaho!* Therefore, arise from your meditation and do some good. It will make you happy.

The Buddha's Two Truths in Middle Way Madhyamaka "are assigned on the basis of the mind of an ordinary person in the world". As our ordinary mind begins to understand the prodigious logic of the non-conceptual dimension—the absence of any independent nature or self-existence—this understanding becomes the "basis for the classification" of the Two Truths, relative (*samvriti satya*), and ultimate (*paramartha satya*). From Chandrakirti's *The Entrance to the Middle Way*:

Because neither of the two levels of truth has an independent nature, they are neither permanent entities nor nihilistic voids.

For Longchenpa, Relative Truth (*kunzog denpa*) may be characterized as the relative experiential data of the "six consciousnesses" and their *skandhas* as they perceive, impute, conceive, and reify their inherently illusory objects. Ultimate Truth (*don dampa*) is characterized on the basis of *dharmadhatu*, the ultimate unbounded whole of the basic space (*ying*) of all appearing relative, conventional phenomena that arise within it, and are instantiated in time and space through it. The vast expanse of this nameless, selfless, timeless boundless nondual ultimate whole embraces and subsumes its relative parts in a perfectly subjective unity—beyond name, concept, and belief.

So yes, Relative Truth manifests as the deceptive, dualistic "concealer truths" of conceptual imputation, elaboration, and reification of the raw data of the six consciousnesses. "All the phenomena of samsara (ordinary mind and mental states...) are relative" (Longchenpa). In the clear words of Chandrakirti:

Ignorance obscures the true nature of phenomena and therefore falsifies everything. Any of its fabrications, which seem to be true, were said by the Sage to be (only) "relatively true". (Chandrakirti *Ibid.*)

#### Longchenpa on Ultimate Truth:

As to what characterizes ultimate truth, it is in essence a freedom from dualistic elaboration...In that it cannot be realized by means of verbal descriptions and the like, it cannot be understood by means of anything other than itself. It is beyond concepts, for the sullyng factors of ordinary mind and mental states subside within the basic space of phenomena. It is free of all conceptual elaboration, and it is impervious to any system of tenets...Even the middle way, free of conceptual elaboration, cannot be established... In brief, nirvana is a state of profundity and peace; it is basic space, completely pure by nature, and it is the mind, free of all obscuration, that realizes this space—the timeless awareness of buddhahood, to which this completely pure field manifests without change...the state of meditative equipoise, as well as those post-meditation experiences of profound insight that are essentially identical to that state. All of these constitute what is ultimately true (Longchenpa *op.cit.* 117).

As you may have suspected, Madhyamaka has two main sub-schools; "two major branches". These are the Yogachara Svatantrika (Yogic Autonomy school; *Shentong*), and the Prasangika (Middle Way Consequence school; *Rangtong*). Of these two "highest" Madhyamaka branches, "The Prasangika system expounds the very highest view of all the cause-based dialectical approaches" (*ibid.* p.126). (Madhyamaka is the Buddhist Middle Way teaching of the Madhyamikas who follow it.)

Recall from our "*Rangtong* and *Shentong*" discussion in this chapter, *Rangtong* is "emptiness of self", or intrinsic emptiness, and *Shentong* is "emptiness of other", or extrinsic emptiness.

Prasangika *Rangtong* explains *shunyata*/emptiness as a "non-affirming negative"; the negation of self, and of "other" phenomena perceived by a self. This apparitional face of phenomenal reality is *dharmin* (Tib. *cho can*).

Yogachara *Shentong* utilizes an *affirming* negation; emptiness is more than a negative void. Indeed, emptiness is—after the radical *Rangtong* Prasangika transcendental emptiness reduction—the remaining clear light luminosity of nondual primordial wisdom (*jnana, yeshe*) that is none other than our Buddha nature/Buddha mind (*buddhajnana*); innate Buddha gnosis of pristine *buddic* cognition of sameness (*samatajnana, nyam nyid yeshe*). So many words and concepts for That that is empty of words and concepts!

We discovered in the *Shentong* view that the seed of *Dzogchen*, ultimate primordial wisdom (*jnana, yeshe*) "primordial purity" (*kadag*) of the *dharmakaya* base/ground (*gzhi rigpa*) is empty of any *relative* appearing reality—empty of anything "other" than itself—but not empty of its own "spontaneous presence" (*lhundrub*)—the very Buddha nature/Buddha essence of mind. Primordial *Adi Buddha* Samantabhadra, Vajradhara—selfless bright Presence of That.

In *Rangtong*, "intrinsic emptiness of self", we meditate upon the utter absence of self-ego-I—on *dharmadhatu*, selfless, boundless primordial whole, free of conceptual fabrication. In *Shentong*, "extrinsic emptiness of other", we meditate on what is "other" than oneself, *all* phenomena—emptiness of self and emptiness of a self appearing through the matrix of all arising spacetime phenomenal reality. For *Shentong*, the Buddha's *shunyata*/emptiness is pervaded by ultimate *tathagatagarbha/sugatagarbha*—Buddha nature—the unity of luminous clarity and emptiness. These two share a metaphysical relation of identity—two faces of one nonlocal, nondual *buddic* principle.

In both *Rangtong* and *Shentong* contemplative depth of understanding of nondual emptiness evolves through dualistic and nondual practice until even the subtlest concepts of emptiness and Buddha nature Presence are surrendered to the formless ultimate—direct, nondual (*advaya*, "not one, not two") clear light luminosity—the union of luminosity and emptiness.

From the view of Ultimate Truth, in the Hinayana or First Turning of Buddha's Wheel of Dharma, the ultimate is selfless *shunyata*/emptiness. In the Mahayana Second Turning it is emptiness of both self and all other phenomena that is entirely free of compounded complexity and conceptual fabrication and elaboration. In the Vajrayana/Secret Mantra Third Turning of the Wheel the nondual ultimate nature of mind is the clear light luminosity of Buddha Nature (*tathagatagarbha*)—in the *Ati Yoga* of the Great Perfection—the *Perfect Sphere of Dzogchen*.

That said, nondual *Dzogchen* transcends, yet embraces all philosophical views, semiotics, concepts, and beliefs. Just so, *Dzogchen* may express and manifest through *Shentong* or *Rangtong*; or through any tenet system view, or path, or bodhisattva conduct.

Since the advent of the 19th century Vajrayana ecumenical *Rimé* movement, many lamas have told that we require both the *Rangtong* and the *Shentong* views. We come to understand the emptiness of intrinsic existence of appearing reality through *Rangtong*; and the luminosity of our indwelling Buddha nature through *Shentong*. The radiant cognizance of the appearing phenomenal world, with the bright luminous clarity of its perfect emptiness—always already a present unity.

*Shentong* lamas sometimes view *Rangtong* as a practice bridge to *Shentong*. We begin by understanding *Rangtong* selflessness (*anatman*), the no-self of all phenomena; then may we fully understand and realize the *Shentong* luminous Buddha nature of mind.

We shall now very briefly review the two seminal Buddhist Middle Way Madhyamaka tenet systems, Yogachara and Prasangika, in terms of their ontology—what *ultimately* exists.

The three approaches to the Buddha's *Path*—Hinayana Shravaka, Pretyekabuddha, and Mahayana Bodhisattva—as practiced within the four tenet systems exceeds the scope of our present exploration of Buddhist philosophy. We obliquely engaged the Path under the rubric "Buddhist Ethics" in Chapter IV. However, the Path is definitively presented by *Dzogchen* master Longchenpa in Richard Barron's excellent translation (*Op. Cit.* Longchenpa 2007).

This next bit of Buddhist dialectics is wondrously intriguing; and by its very nature quite complex. It shall require a bit of patience—the third of the Six *Paramitas*/Perfections of the Mahayana. The philosophically squeamish may wish to skip it altogether.

Tibetan Buddhist Vajrayana Middle Way Madhyamaka, the 4th Buddhist tenet system, is divided into two sub-schools, as we have just seen. These are the Svatantrika (Autonomy) school which itself has two sub-schools, Yogachara Svatantrika Madhyamaka (Yogic Autonomy) of Asanga, Vasubandu, Bhavaviveka, Shantirakshita; and the Sautrantika Svatantrika Madhyamaka (Sutra Autonomy) school. "Autonomy" here means the autonomous existence of "valid cognition" (*pramana*), arguments which ostensibly prove their metaphysical assertions.

The Metaphysical Idealism of Yogachara Madhyamaka views objective reality in the mode of Chittamatra/Mind Only (the third tenet system), with no relative nor ultimate existence at all. Yet, on the basis of Mind Only stuff does indeed exist, but only as mental processing, as ideas in the mind. Sautrantika Svatantrika views relative reality in the manner of Sutra Sautrantika (the 2nd tenet system)—objective reality really exists—not as conceptually abstract universals—but as concrete particulars.

The other Madhyamaka school is Prasangika, the Middle Way Consequence school of Nagarjuna, Buddhapalita, Chandrakirti, and Tsongkhapa. So, the two main sub-schools of Middle Way Madhyamaka are: Svatantrika (with its two schools), and Prasangika. Well and good.

Both Prasangika Madhyamaka and Yogachara Svatantrika Madhyamaka are concerned to address the teaching in the Buddha's Second Turning of the Wheel of Dharma, to wit, no-self/*anatman*, and emptiness/*shunyata* (*Ch. II*). We have seen that the *Rangtong-Shentong* deliberation—with polemical antecedents in earlier Sutrayana—is wholly a Tibetan invention; and thus extends our concern to the Third Turning, the ontological status of Buddha nature, and of the luminous clear light primordial wisdom gnosis (*jnana, yeshe*).

Both Yogachara and Prasangika assert that the objects of the domain of Relative Truth are absent and empty of any Ultimate Truth reality. The ultimate nature of relatively appearing reality is *shunyata*/emptiness, beyond our reifying conceptual imputations. This of course is a conceptual assertion. But it is an "enumerated" or provisional and approximate assertion about ultimate truth. For Madhyamaka, the "unenumerated" Ultimate Truth is the ultimate reality that is, when no one is thinking, or talking about it.

Prasangika Madhyamaka, the Middle Way Consequence school is, as we've seen, the venerated tradition of Nagarjuna, Aryadeva, Buddhapalita, Chandrakirti, and Shantideva. Prasangika Madhyamaka was founded by 5th century Buddhapalita upon Nagarjuna's (d. 55 AD) proto-Prasangika teaching in his lapidary *Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way* (*Mulamadhyamakakarika*). Jamgon Kongtrul Lodro Thaye explains Prasangika thusly:

Apparent reality is whatever mind imagines.  
It is asserted following relative worldly tradition.  
Genuine ultimate reality is inexpressible and

inconceivable. This is the middle way consequence school's tradition (*Treasury of Knowledge*).

We've seen in some detail above in "The Middle Way" that Prasangika means "using the consequences" of "making no assertions" (or negations) as to the ultimate nature of reality itself; refraining from attaching to or defending any conceptual position regarding the existence or nonexistence of appearing phenomena. Why? Because ultimate reality is beyond any and all conceptual cognitive processing. Yet, relative spacetime reality grasped by the conceptual intellect has profound relative, conventional value. After all, this is the dimension in which we *choose* to practice the buddhadharma, and the ethical precepts of precious *bodhicitta* conduct.

Thus does Prasangika tread a fine "middle path" between the Buddha's Two Truths—relative and ultimate. We accomplish the nondual Ultimate Truth of liberation through the dualistic Relative Truth of the Path. We practice these two as the prior and present wisdom unity that they always already are. "Practice these two as a unity" (Padmasambhava).

Moreover, Prasangika avoids the metaphysical extremes of eternalist, substantialist Materialism; and of nihilistic Absolute Idealism. Nagarjuna told it well (*Mulamadhyamakakarika*):

Existence is the view of realism. Nonexistence is the view of nihilism. Therefore the wise abide neither in existence nor nonexistence...Those who assert neither existence nor nonexistence are refuted by no one.

Because all physical and mental phenomena arise in dependence upon interdependent causes and conditions (*pratitya samutpada*) they have no intrinsic existence from their own side, and are thus absent and empty (*shunya*) of self-existence (*svabhava*)—empty of self (*anatman*), and empty of ultimate existence; though once again, apparitional appearing phenomena do indeed possess a nominal, relative-conventional existence. How else could we practice dharma? This is the middle way between the metaphysical extremes of absolute existence (Materialism), and absolute nonexistence (Idealism).

For Madhyamaka, ultimate reality embraces and subsumes relative reality, beyond our concepts about existence and nonexistence. Thus is the ontic prior, and epistemic present unity of the Buddha's Two Truths this *one truth*, invariant throughout our entire human cognitive processional—perceptual, conceptual, contemplative, and perfectly subjective nondual.

The contemplative, meditative realization of ultimate emptiness/*dharmakaya* is the full *bodhi* of liberation, enlightenment, and Buddhahood. How do we accomplish this? Assiduous practice of the Path, of course.

This moment to moment continuity of our *relative* practice is an always present awareness portal into the already present *ultimate* Buddha love-wisdom mind Presence that we are now.