

#### The Ultimate Truth

In order to acquire the antidote to ignorance namely, the wisdom realising emptiness, we need to understand the Ultimate Truth.

The Ultimate Truth is the ultimate nature of existence, the ultimate nature of all Six Realms beings, the ultimate nature of all the phenomena right up to the enlightened state.

We have just discussed the Conventional Nature of all things, which is whatever object/phenomena we perceive and label as existing i.e. existing in a way that is imputed by our mind (e.g. we see something in nature and we label it a flower and start to relate to it as a flower; or we see a creature and label it as an animal and relate to that creature as an animal). When we perceive an object/phenomena we project onto it a label; we give it a label, a name and then, we start to grasp at it as if it is independently existing. This is the problem . This is the fault. We see beings, objects and phenomena as independently existing "out there" instead of realizing that they are dependently-arising (i.e. dependent upon our mind and its projections). Once we are able to understand that the Conventional Truth of a flower or an animal or any object and phenomena is a dependant-existence or a dependant-arising (which is the opposite of our initial perception that these were independently-existing), then our mind will begin to understand Ultimate Truth.

Our perceptions of flower, table, suffering, happiness, Buddha, enlightenment lead us to believe that they are all independently existing. This is called the (ignorant) grasping mind and this grasping mind can be categorized into two aspects:

- 1) The self grasping mind which is grasping at the concept that "I" or the self, exists independently; that Tenzin Zopa exists independently;
- 2) the self grasping mind which holds the view that a flower/phenomena exists independently, without any causes and conditions.

You can also say that the grasping mind believes that the self or the "I" is the same as one's aggregates (form, consciousness, feeling, discrimination, karmic imprints). For example, when you look at your hand, you perceive it as independently existing as a hand "out there".

Similarly with your head. When you see your head, your head appears to be independently existing. This is the ignorant mind that grasps onto a self or "I". But you never think that in order to have this thing called "my head", first of all you needed to have a father and mother to form it and the past karma to have a head; then having a mind to label it as a head. You never think about these things. The direct and immediate conclusion is that you perceive your head as solid and independently arising all by itself. Look at yourself. You never think of yourself as dependently existing. This is the ignorant mind that grasps onto phenomena.



These two graspings (i.e. grasping at the independent existence of self and of phenomena) are the obstacles to us realizing emptiness and thus block us from becoming Buddha. In order to eradicate these, we need to investigate – using a form of "opposite mind" that refutes independent existence and examine the object of negation (i.e. the belief in independent existence). Once we do, we will arrive at the antidote, which is the wisdom realizing selflessness of self and wisdom realizing selflessness of phenomena.

This grasping mind is the ignorant mind which has clouded our Buddha nature and put it in chains and that's why we are not yet Buddhas. In order to break the chains, we need the mind that is opposite to ignorance, which is wisdom. With the wing of wisdom on the one hand and compassion and bodhicitta on the other, one can fly across the ocean of samsara and reach enlightenment.

Here we conclude that it is important to understand the three points:

- 1) The fundamental foundation of the Buddha's teachings is the Two Truths namely Conventional and Ultimate Truth;
- 2) The fundamental practice is the path cultivating method & wisdom; and
- 3) The fundamental result to aim for is the Two bodies of Buddha the wisdom body of Dharmakaya, and form body of rupakaya.

We now understand how to go about following the steps to enlightenment.

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## Can one attain enlightenment after understanding Conventional Truth and Ultimate Truth?

Once we understand the philosophy of the Conventional and Ultimate Truths, we need to cultivate it, meditate on it until we gain direct realizations. But even with firm intellectual understanding and effort at cultivation and meditation, are these alone sufficient to enable us to gain the realization on all the stages of the Path up to enlightenment? This is a big question, a huge question and the answer is that it is still not enough. There would still be something missing, something we still need before our efforts can produce the final, ultimate realizations. And what is this "something"? It is the blessings of Buddha and the blessings of our Guru.

Why are the blessings of Buddha and the blessings of our Guru necessary for one's attainment of enlightenment? It is because while we are on the Dharma journey, there can be many obstacles and in order to overcome the obstacles, we need to go through a great deal of purification. This is due to the accumulation of negativities through countless lives and we need much support and great merits in order to overcome these hindrances and progress. For this, the strength of our connection to the Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and Gurus is vital. For example, the Buddha Kuan Yin. By recalling the Kuan Yin's actions and qualities, it inspires us to engage into such actions. Similarly, we gain inspiration from the Buddha's manifestation in the form of our Buddhist master or Guru, who in day to day life, guides us, encourages us, pushes us, inspires us and reminds us to cultivate bodhicitta or recite Om Mani Padme Hum to benefit beings or gather to do social service with the Dharma motivation and develop a good heart or become a better human being for yourself and the community for this and future lives. All these actions help us to actualize realizations of the entire Path within one's mental continuum.

Therefore the Guru (who is to be viewed as inseparable from the Buddha) is the supreme object from which you can accumulate a vast amount of merit and is also the most potent object in relation to whom you can achieve great purification of past negative karma. Buddha Vajradhara prophesized that during degenerate times, he will manifest into the ordinary form of the Guru because beings in such degenerate times will not be able to see the Buddha directly even if the Buddha appeared directly in front of them. Because of that, all the Buddhas have no choice but to manifest in the aspect of ordinary persons like us, who are born from mother, then go through the process of aging, experiencing sickness and then dying; appearing to have anger, attachment, exactly like us ordinary beings. If the Guru did not manifest in a form that is similar to us, we would not know how to relate to the Guru. For this reason, Guru is the supreme object of one's merit and supreme object for purification.

If one is unable to see the Buddha who has appeared in front of you, you would not

be able to receive any benefit from that. Whereas from your own Guru who might be ordinary in appearance but due to being present and guiding you with pure heart and compassion, you will receive great benefit. This is a simple but clear reason for us to accept the prophecy by Buddha Vajradhara that in degenerate times, Buddha will appear in the form of Gurus.

None of the past Buddhas, including Buddha Shakyamuni were able to attain enlightenment without relying on the Guru. None.



Therefore, how do we derive the guru's blessings which bring us great merit, great purification and profound realizations? It is through our devotion to the Guru and our determination to please the holy mind of Guru. How? The best way to devote to the Guru and please him is through your practice of the Buddha's advice, namely, to cultivate compassion etc. And while we are in the process of cultivating compassion, we should simultaneously train one's body, speech and mind in being humble and having great respect to the Guru and to all living beings. Be very sweet, say respectful words, gentle words - not only to the Guru but to all living beings as well; have positive virtuous thoughts and pure thoughts towards the Guru and all sentient beings. To live a life in this manner is the method to derive blessings from the Guru who in fact is the Buddha.

But how do we know whether the Guru is Buddha or not? It depends on your own mind, your faith, your devotion, your perception. If you have full faith and conviction seeing the ordinary Guru as Buddha, as having all the good qualities of the Buddha, as inseparable from the Buddha, as in oneness with the Buddha, then that ordinary Guru is Buddha for you. And you will receive Buddha's blessing in relation to that ordinary Guru due to your pure mind. Otherwise, even if Buddha appeared in front of you, you would not receive as great a blessing.



As Buddha said,

'Never commit unwholesome action, Always perform wholesome action, Subdue one's mind, This is the teaching of the Buddha.' In order to subdue one's mind, the practices of enlightenment include the practice of devotion and respect to the Guru and similarly to all living beings. If we have a respectful mind, a forgiving mind, an understanding mind, a compassionate mind, all these help us to subdue our mind. As long as we do not cultivate the Buddha's advice or Guru's advice to subdue our mind in that manner, our efforts do not become Dharma practice. The longer we practice dharma, the longer we practice Kuan Yin/Chenrezig, the lesser ought to be our delusions; our good heart should grow. The more we chant Om Mani Padme Hum, the more we look at Kuan Yin's image, the more we mediate, the more we see our Guru, the more we come into our Dharma Center, all aspects of our physical and verbal presence should be seen as becoming more humble, more gentle, more forgiving, more smiling, more caring, more respectful.

The sign that we have effectively cultivated the advice of one's Guru and the Buddha, is our delusions reducing and our good heart, positive/virtuous mind increasing.

The root of the Path is the Guru, seeing the Guru in Buddha and seeing the Guru as inseparable from Buddha. By upholding this practice, then there is the real possibility that one will receive great blessings.

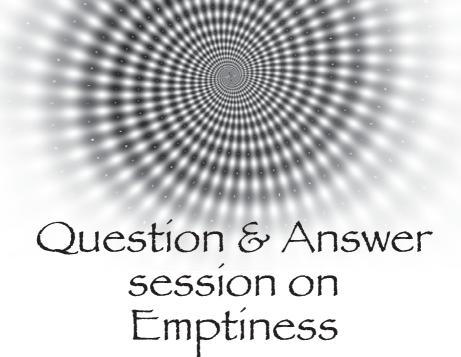


When one sees the faults in one's Guru, then one should realise that they are the faults of oneself being projected onto Guru. Why does one see faults in the Guru? Because as explained, Buddhas purposely manifest in an ordinary aspect to enable us to relate to, to communicate with and to have a cup of tea together. While having a cup of tea, we receive advice, encouragement and Dharma but because our mind is so distracted and contaminated, there is always the danger of us seeing only faults of the Guru. As long as we make sure to remind ourselves that the fault is only our own reflection, it is like when one looks at one's face in the mirror and one sees a mark on one's nose, although there may be no mark on the mirror itself but because of the reflection, it appears as if the mirror is also stained with that mark. In truth, it is only one's reflection. By thinking this way, you can tame your mind and train in devotion and then you will definitely obtain the blessings needed for you to complete your practice towards enlightenment.

Upon concluding any activity or contemplation on Dharma, it is good to dedicate with positive mind the merits of doing such activity and may this merit be the complete cause to actualize all the realization on the stages of the Path within oneself to obtain enlightenment, as well as the complete cause to liberate entire numberless beings into the state of full enlightenment. Rejoice in the merit in oneself and all others and think,

"The person making this dedication (which is ourselves), the merit which we are dedicating and the goal of dedication which is enlightenment, all these three phenomena lack of inherent existence, are empty from their own side and empty of independent existence. May our days be auspicious, may our nights be auspicious, may every single moment be auspicious for oneself, family, friends and all sentient beings."

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# Question and Answer session on Emptiness



Question: Why is it necessary to differentiate between the emptiness of self and the emptiness of phenomena?

Answer: The emptiness of self relates to the concept of "I". The emptiness of phenomena refers to one's aggregates, elements, the world around us [the lower schools of philosophy assert the emptiness of self only; whereas the higher schools assert the emptiness of self and emptiness of phenomena].

Question: The 3rd Noble Truth is the Truth of Cessation. What is this Cessation?

Answer: This refers to the wisdom realizing emptiness because once we have this wisdom, it causes all delusions and samsara to cease.



# Question: What are the 4 Buddhist schools of philosophy regarding the subject of emptiness?

Answer: The 4 Buddhist schools of emptiness philosophy are Vaibashika, Sautrantika, Cittamatra and Madhyamika (under Madhaymika, there are two sub-schools, namely the Madhyamika-Sautrantika and the Madhyamika-Prasangika views. The Madhyamika-Prasangika school is said to be the highest or most profound school of thought on emptiness). It should be noted that the Mahayana Sutra and Tantra philosophies assert the Madhyamika-Prasangika view.

The two lower schools i.e. the Vaibashika and Sautrantika refer only to the emptiness/selflessness of the person, whereas the two higher schools i.e. Cittamatrin and Madhyamika refer to the emptiness of the person and the emptiness of phenomena (which is far more subtle). When we gain realisations, we realize the selflessness of "I" first and then the selflessness of phenomena; when we eradicate the defilements, we eradicate the belief in phenomena first and then the belief in the concept of "I".

We understand the lack of permanent existence. We might even understand that nothing exists from its own side and that things are merely-labeled by our minds but we will not be able to realize the highest view (Madhyamiky-Prasangika view) until we understand emptiness in the context of dependent arising.



Vaibashika, Sautrantika and Cittamatra schools all assert true existence. Inherent existence or independent existence are aspects of true existence. The Madhyamika-Sautrantika (M-S) and the Madhyamika-Prasangika (M-P) assert the absence of true existence and absence of inherent existence. M-S however, assert that there needs to be an aspect of existence from the object's side (which is quite similar thinking to the Sautrantika school hence the name Madhyamika Sautrantika school), whereas the M-P says there is no aspect of existence of any kind from the side of the object. All are a dependent arising.



Question: What are the 4 seals?

Answer: In order for one to say that one is holding a Buddhist view/philosophy, one needs to accept the 4 seals and they are:

- 1. All produced phenomena are impermanent (note however, that matters like space, Dharmakaya which is Buddha's wisdom body and the cessation of negativities are permanent).
- 2. All contaminated phenomena are suffering e.g. samsaric beings' minds, elements, trees. Elements are contaminated in relation to sentient beings because they exist as the result of the perception of sentient beings which have deluded karmic imprints). Our views of even things like trees, are suffering because they are perceived as trees by our mind that is influenced by contaminated imprints, which in turn make us see flaws in the trees e.g. first seeing it as something of beauty and usefulness, then decaying and of further use. Our impure karmic imprints cause us to project unpleasant images.
- 3. All phenomena are empty and selfless (note that the different schools of Buddhist philosophy have their own interpretation of these terms).
- 4. Nirvana is peace i.e. everlasting peace.

Vaibashika and Sautrantika accepts the words describing the 4 seals literally without much analysis and interpretation; the Cittamatra view holds the 4 seals plus the view that existence arises as a ripening of karmic mental imprints. Madhyamika-Prasangika talks about dependent-arising and labels being projected onto a base.



Question: There are realized masters from various Buddhist traditions – Gelugs, Kagyu, Nyingma, Sakya. Which school of emptiness philosophy do they belong to?

Answer: All 4 Tibetan schools of philosophy are based on the Makhdyamika-Prasangika view of emptiness – for the Gelugs, we use the term "Emptiness"; the Kagyus refer to "Mahamudra"; the Nyingmas refer to "Dzogchen". All these are referring to emptiness according to the Madhaymika Prasangika view. The principles on the Buddha nature are also the same amongst the 4 traditions.

Question: How do we apply emptiness in our Dharma practice e.g. when making offerings, doing dedications after reciting prayers and doing purification practices,?

Answer: First, it is important to understand emptiness in the correct manner i.e. that self and phenomena lack inherent existence (they appear to us as existing due to dependent-arising i.e. due to our minds projecting or giving a label to the person/object that the mind is encountering). Emptiness does not make phenomena non-existent or into nothingness. It is already the nature of all phenomena.

When offering light to Tara having a mind understanding dependent-arising, that is applying an understanding of emptiness to that light offering, brings about great merit. [For this, reflect again on what has been taught here on depednet arising and emptiness.] Similarly, remembering emptiness when reciting the dedication prayer (i.e. that the person making the dedication and the act of dedicating is also a dependent-arising between the act and the mind) creates the cause of enlightenment. Similarly, purification practices when done with understanding of dependent-arising and emptiness, turns



purification into something "real" because the causes created through those practices, will give rise to positive results. When we say to "Seal the dedication with emptiness" we are confirming one's prayer-action based on one's remembrance of emptiness.



Question: When we say that things exist on a conventional level i.e. to establish conventional existence, do we need suitable/qualified base to input our mental labels?

Answer: Yes. The criteria for us to say that something conventionally-exists, it must be well-known to the world/ordinary consciousness (example, we use a cup to drink and not to write with); it must not be contradicted by valid cognition or in other words, not contradicted by our ordinary-perception/use (example, a cup is not a pen because it would contradict our experience of those objects in our daily life); it must not be invalidated by the mind that analyses the ultimate nature of existence.

#### Ouestion: How does the mind label itself?

Answer: We first need to establish a valid, conventional base that is generally accepted—please refer to the criteria referred to above question. Mind (according to its karmic imprints) then imputes/projects views and perceptions onto its own thoughts.





Question: The Buddha's teachings talk about all things being impermanent, yet one hears about "permanent phenomena". What is this permanent phenomena?

Answer: The Buddha said all produced phenomena are impermanent i.e. things that come about from causes and conditions do not last. There is however, permanent phenomena that did not come about from causes and conditions e.g. space; and phenomena which does not change e.g. the cessation of suffering, Buddha's wisdom body (the Dharmakaya). However, it needs to be clearly understood that whilst space, the end of suffering or Buddha's wisdom are permanent, they are still empty of inherent existence i.e. it requires a mind to encounter the phenomena and give it a name/label, in this case, "space" or "cessation" or "Dharmakaya".

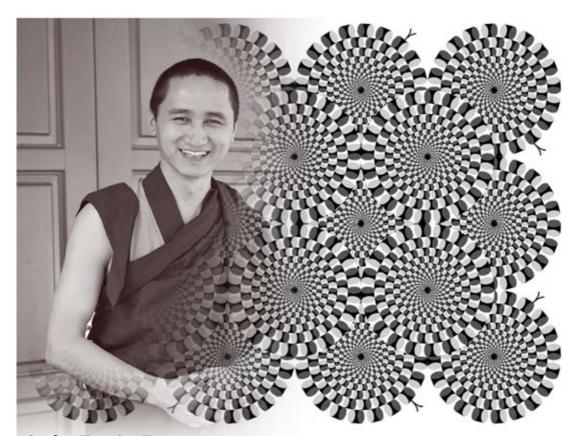
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Geshe Tenzin Zopa has a contemporary style of teaching which he combines with the ancient wisdom derived from his years of philosophical studies and debate, thereby benefiting everyone who has met or heard him teach. Geshe Tenzin Zopa is the face of a dynamic and socially engaged Buddhism in the 21st Century.

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