

The Madhyamaka School – Ultimate Truth

Emptiness

For both subschools, ultimate truth is the final mode of existence of things and events.

- Svatantrika subschool – Emptiness is the absence of true existence. Two types of emptiness: (i) person; (ii) phenomena. However, emptiness and cessation are *not* the same. They use the term *selflessness* – selflessness of persons and selflessness of phenomena. The selflessness of person refers to the unfindability of a self among the five aggregates – the same selflessness that is presented in the lower schools. The selflessness of phenomena is the absence of true existence of phenomena. For the Svatantrika subschool, hearers (Skt. *shravaka*) and solitary realizers (Skt. *pratyekabuddha*) must realize only the emptiness of *true* existence to achieve liberation (Skt. *nirvana*) and become an arhat.
- Prasangika subschool – Two types of emptiness: (i) person; (ii) phenomena. Assert that the emptiness of phenomena is synonymous with the complete cessation of suffering – emptiness and cessation are the same. For the Prasangika subschool, to achieve liberation, arhats must have a direct realization of emptiness, which means not just realizing the absence of *true* existence (the absence of causeless, concrete object within the inherent base and label), but of *inherent* existence as well (the fact that there is no inherent nature within even base and label). Without realizing the emptiness of both persons and phenomena, there is no way to achieve liberation, and no way to achieve full enlightenment.

Ultimate Truth – Definition

- The Sanskrit term for ultimate truth is *paramarta satya* and in Tibetan it is *dondam denpa*.
- Svatantrika subschool – *don* refers to the final mode of existence of an object; *dam* refers to the supreme mind apprehending the final mode of existence. *Dondam* is the *supreme* mind ascertaining the *fact*, the final mode of existence. In other words, "ultimate" has two levels: the objective (the supreme fact of the mode of existence [*don*], and the subjective (the mind apprehending it [*dam*]). *Denpa* means "truth" in that there is no deception.
- Prasangika subschool – *Dondam* is simply the "supreme fact" – that the final mode of existence of an object is its lack of true and inherent existence. Ultimate truth is interpreted from the objective side only – not the subjective. *Denpa* means "truth" in that there is no deception in the ultimate mode of existence.

Ultimate Mind

- What distinguishes conventional and ultimate truths is not the object, but the way the object is ascertained by the mind. Analyzed by an *ultimate mind* – which sees the lack of inherent existence of an object – it is an ultimate truth.
- "The Buddha says that all things have two aspects, and they may be perceived correctly or falsely. What is perceived correctly is ultimate truth, and what is perceived falsely is conventional truth" (Chandrakirti, *Supplement to the Middle Way*).
- *All* things and events have these two aspects.
- A perceiver of reality is also called an "ultimate mind", that is, a consciousness analyzing the final mode of existence of an object. The aspect found by such a mind is called an ultimate truth, or emptiness, or *thusness*.
- The aspect of an object found by a perceiver of falsities – a conventional mind – is called a conventional or concealer truth.
- One way for investigating ultimate and conventional truths is by looking at things in terms of *subject*, *object*, and *action*. For example:
 - (i) Subject: A writer
 - (ii) Object: A book
 - (iii) Action: Activity of writing
- Conventional truths – one can use many criteria in exploring the subject/object/action relationship, and all of these will be conventional minds analyzing conventional truths. Book, writer, and writing all still appear to the consciousness as having intrinsic reality, whereas in reality they do not. Consequently, they are called false objects of knowledge and concealer truths.
- Ultimate truths – when an ultimate mind analyzes the final mode of existence of the writer, the book, or the activity of writing by seeing the lack of intrinsic existence, there is no disparity between the way the object exists and how it appears to the mind. This does not mean, however, that the mind itself exists ultimately – nothing exists ultimately.
- Two stages of ultimate mind:
 - (i) Analytical stage: The conceptual mind analyzes the ultimate mode of existence of things and events.
 - (ii) Nonconceptual stage: The mind moves beyond the conceptual to realize the wisdom of emptiness directly. Both minds realize the same object – an emptiness of inherent existence, but the quality of mind is different.
- Description of process: The process begins with *analysis* where one slowly develops an inferential realization that things have no inherent or intrinsic existence. Eventually, the analytical mind settles down and can be placed single-pointedly on that absence in a state of *meditative equipoise*, where the mind does not waver at all from its object. There is no more analyzing because the mind resides firmly in the awareness of emptiness. This is the direct realization of emptiness – where there is no awareness of an "I" who is thinking "emptiness", but only emptiness itself.