

Illusion and Reality – How Things Exist

The Truth That Conceals

- Conventional truth: A conventional truth or concealer truth – this "truth that conceals" – creates a fictitious world that works for us on a certain level.
- Reality and fiction: We have a strong sense of what's real and what's not – generally, we feel we can easily distinguish between reality and fiction. The relative world of conventionalities – all things and events – including our own sense of self, appear very independent or solid. All sentient beings possess this ignorance equally. Nevertheless, at one level it is all fiction
- Conception: We conceptualize – this conceptual mind is not necessarily a negative mind. We need concepts to understand reality – and they can help us reduce our ignorance. However, they are not the final solution – the real solution will come from direct perception, not from our conceptual mind.
- Dispelling ignorance: The ignorance we possess within ourselves will not disappear instantly, in just a moment. This ignorance will be removed through the process of gradually substituting other non-ignorant minds. We slowly eliminate our delusions until we reach the state of cessation – which is liberation or enlightenment. (The Tibetan masters tell us that realizing ultimate truth is *not* like having been in a dark room that immediately becomes bright when we switch on the light.)
- Key assertion: *All things and events lack any intrinsic or inherent nature.* However, confusion can arise regarding the difference between inherent existence and existence itself.
- Key differentiation: To understand how things and events exist, it is necessary to differentiate between conventional *truth* and *conventional* existence.
- Ultimate existence: To exist *ultimately* is to exist truly independently – but, nothing exists that way.
- Conventional existence: To exist *conventionally* is to exist dependent on causes and conditions.
- Mode of existence of all things: The *empty interdependence* is the mode of existence of all things – including all conventional and ultimate truths.
- Ultimate existence and inherent existence are synonyms.
- Other schools: They see *lack of inherent existence* as *non-existence*. Therefore, there must be some essential nature.
- How *do* things exist conventionally? Lama Tsongkhapa in the *Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path* gives three criteria for asserting that something exists conventionally:
 - (i) It is known to a conventional consciousness.
 - (ii) No other conventional valid cognition contradicts it being so known.
 - (iii) Reason that accurately analyzes the reality of whether something inherently exists does not contradict it.In sum, not only must something be an object of a conventional consciousness, that consciousness must not be invalidated by another conventional valid cognition, nor by a mind analyzing its final mode of existence, its emptiness.
- Mundane knowledge: This is conventional consciousness – it is the knowledge or consciousness that occurs in all people. It is a "non-analytical" consciousness – it does not analyze the final mode of existence of things and events. It posits the existence of things through perception and language. We know an object through our senses. However, not all objects exist.

- Valid reasoning (valid consciousness): A belief may be erroneous and can be contradicted by valid reasoning. For example, something may be known to a conventional mundane consciousness, but does not actually exist. There are many cultural things – good or bad, right or wrong, philosophical or religious – that are based on the construction of conventional language and that are believed to exist, but in reality do not. For example: Many people have a strong unconscious belief that death will not come for at least a few years or a few decades. However, through analysis, we can ascertain the fact that the time of death is utterly uncertain and that we might actually die at any moment. Another example is Sherlock Holmes: A valid consciousness is needed to actually see the crucial difference between what does and what does not exist – although he is a well-known "object of cognition", such a belief is not valid.
- Ultimate mind: An ultimate mind will not contradict conventional assertions (for example, pleasure and pain arise conventionally from positive and negative actions).

Sequence of Realizing the Two Truths

- *Supplement to the Middle Way* by Chandrakirti (chpt. 6): Correctly and fully understanding the two truths (as explained by Nagarjuna) is critical to experiencing peace.
- Sequence: Conventional truths are the method, and ultimate truths arise from that method. Understanding of conventional truth will help in developing an understanding of ultimate truth.
- How to understand conventional truth: In order to understand a conventional truth, we first need to understand an object's ultimate truth – that is, we need first to determine its lack of inherent existence. Note: We are not dealing here with conventional *knowledge* of a conventional object, but an understanding of the conventional *truth* of that object. This is an important difference.
- Finding concealer truths: Finding concealer truths will not happen until we have found the middle way – that is, emptiness – because to establish something as a concealer truth, we are actually establishing its false nature, the sense that it is inherently existent. This can only be done through refutation when we have found its true mode of existence, its lack of inherent existence.
- Achieving deeper understanding: A fairly gross understanding of ultimate truth takes our understanding of conventional truth to a deeper level. Then, that level of understanding of conventional truth takes our understanding of ultimate truth to a deeper level, and so on.
- Summary: Our understanding of conventional truths will lead us finally to a deep direct realization of the ultimate truth of emptiness. Before that, however, we must use our conceptual, logical understanding of emptiness to realize that the object we are exploring is a conventional truth because it appears to have inherent existence, whereas it does not. This subtle level of conventional truth, wherein the object appears to have an inherent existence, that in fact does not have, will only be realized *after* we have a fairly good understanding of ultimate truth.