

Two Truths: Relative and Ultimate

Discerning the difference between *appearance* (relative truth) and *reality* (ultimate truth) is crucial to our lives. Here are some reflections . . .

1. *Imputations and Reality*

We need to differentiate between what exists as only an *imputation* and what exists *substantially* (in and of itself) and is ultimately true – that is, to distinguish between what is imputed or mere *appearance* (relative truth), and what is *reality* (ultimate truth). Appearances may be illusions.

If we are mindful, we will better see how much of our "perceived" world may be imputed by our deluded minds. If we could focus more on "real" things, we would then also be more likely see the danger inherent within unreal expectations (dealing with the future) and unreal memories (dealing with the past).

A few years ago, I became convinced that a pastor had purposely ignored me at a convention we were attending. I suffered as a result of this delusion for months, *imputing* all sorts of incorrect motives, centring around him not liking me. Finally, out of my inner turmoil, I had the sense to write him a carefully written letter with as much *metta* (goodwill) as I could muster. The response was heart-warming – and disarmed all my imputations (fears, misperceptions, and so forth). How much energy do we waste in our lives as a result of imputing things (and not questioning our assumptions)?

2. *Concepts and Direct Experience*

We need to be mindful of mistaking *conceptions* for *perceptions* – of not discriminating between mediating through *concepts* and *direct perceptual experience*.

We can have *conceptual knowledge* of a subject (from our conceptual consciousness) or *direct experience* of a subject (perceptual consciousness).

Concepts come from inferences. Of course, concepts are not wrong – we could not make sense of the world without concepts. As Geshe Tashi Tsering states in *Relative Truth, Ultimate Truth*: "Imagine a world without labels. There would be no language, no communication, no transference of knowledge such as this; spiritual attainment would be very difficult . . . The most important thing a child can learn is language, which will enable her to make generalities about the world around her.

As adults, however, we need to see the uses and traps of the conceptual mind – something so few of us do" (pp. 72-73). Tsering further reminds us that when we use words, we fall into generality – that is, words are linguistic signs, allowing us to label objects (even if only approximately) for making sense of our world (p. 60).

Direct experience, on the other hand, lies beyond words. Let me use meditation as an example:

Buddhist meditation is not a do-it-yourself subject. Initially, to learn to meditate requires a trusted teacher to set the would-be meditator on the right path.

There are teachers to be found at any Buddhist study center, and there are countless books on the subject that you can access. But let me express some words of caution. Don't take written words as concrete fact, absolute instruction or commandment. This would be to waste the Buddha's advice of thinking for yourself. What meditation achieves develops stage by stage. This will be experienced differently by each person. If an accomplished, advanced meditator described the experience, it wouldn't be the exact experience of anyone else. The only way to understand an experience is to experience it. Try meditation for yourself. It is nearly impossible to put personal experience into comprehensible words. Hoping for someone, even the Buddha, to give us enlightenment shows how far we still have to go. There is only so much guidance you can be given – or need. Once you are past the preliminary stages, you will be very capable of carrying on with only occasionally "touching base" with your teacher. A meditation teacher only offers guidelines, puts up signposts and draws maps. The most accomplished master can't do more. The recipe is not the cake, the instruction is not the experience, and the map is not the treasure chest. (From Venerable Adrienne Howley, *The Naked Buddha*, p. 102.)

Based on my own life, I have found it is needful and useful to develop our spiritual practice within a framework or set of parameters of a particular faith tradition – such as the Buddha's teachings, a particular Christian understanding, a Muslim view, or a Hindu group. We need to accept that their explanation of life will be at variance with others, but nevertheless it provides a most helpful starting point and world view for us. Also, and importantly, we know it has proven useful for others.

As we work within the tradition, we will find that aspects of the teachings become clearer and more meaningful for us.

However, as time goes on, we will also see that aspects of our group's understanding and explanation of theology, psychology, and cosmology are relative or conventional truths rather than ultimate truths (anything which is theory would be relative truth) – in other words, there will be teachings which are beyond our capability to understand fully, even though we may intellectually understand the arguments. We may also find that some of the texts and explanations do not fit with our own findings.

Eventually, we have to gain our own understanding of the way things are. The teachings we are given need to be open to rigorous testing at each point of the journey against our experience. In time, through diligent practice of the spiritual path, we will see where teachings stand up and where they falter. We will come to the veracity of the teachings through our own experience, and we will be able to prove the points fully to our own satisfaction.

In this context, I have found meditation to be extremely valuable. Through meditation, we will gradually come to understand our own true nature, and even that of everything with which we come into contact. We can choose to focus on and experience what we find in the present moment, rather than being reliant on other people's ideas and concepts (which are relative or provisional truths).

Also at this point, I have found the Buddha's teaching to the Kalamas people to be instructive:

"So, as I said, Kalamas: 'Don't go by reports, by legends, by traditions, by scripture, by logical conjecture, by inference, by analogies, by agreement through pondering views, by probability, or by the thought, "This contemplative is our teacher." When you know for yourselves that, "These qualities are unskillful; these qualities are blameworthy; these qualities are criticized by the wise; these qualities, when adopted and carried out, lead to harm and to suffering" — then you should abandon them.' Thus was it said. And in reference to this was it said.

"Now, Kalamas, don't go by reports, by legends, by traditions, by scripture, by logical conjecture, by inference, by analogies, by agreement through pondering views, by probability, or by the thought, 'This contemplative is our teacher.'

When you know for yourselves that, 'These qualities are skillful; these qualities are blameless; these qualities are praised by the wise; these qualities, when adopted and carried out, lead to welfare and to happiness' — then you should enter and remain in them."
("Kalama Sutta: To the Kalamas" translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 1994. Taken from <http://www.accesstoinsight.org>)

In his brief introduction to the translation of the "Kalama Sutta", Thanissaro Bhikkhu states: "Although this discourse is often cited as the Buddha's *carte blanche* for following one's own sense of right and wrong, it actually says something much more rigorous than that. Traditions are not to be followed simply because they are traditions. Reports (such as historical accounts or news) are not to be followed simply because the source seems reliable. One's own preferences are not to be followed simply because they seem logical or resonate with one's feelings.

Instead, any view or belief must be tested by the results it yields when put into practice; and — to guard against the possibility of any bias or limitations in one's understanding of those results — they must further be checked against the experience of people who are wise. The ability to question and test one's beliefs in an appropriate way is called appropriate attention. The ability to recognize and choose wise people as mentors is called having admirable friends."

In closing, I believe that, it is important to always test, prove, or disprove knowledge — in the light of one's own experience. (One needs to be cautious of simply supplanting one set of fixed ideas for another.) Of course, reading should not be undervalued — especially for inspiration, illumination, and to challenge the ideas one holds. Equally important, however, is the place of meditation practice.

One of my teachers, Andrew Quernmore, once said: "I do not believe it is useful to spend too much time attempting to reconcile the detailed explanations of different religious traditions: that road leads to nothing but frustration, confusion and disagreement. Far better to choose one path and work hard to fully understand its teachings. Cast them aside when they have outlived their usefulness for you or when textual knowledge has been supplanted by wisdom . . . In time, of course, all sects and frameworks will fall away as direct knowing arises. All forms of Buddhism will eventually have no use for the committed practitioner. The map is not the terrain."

We can keep ourselves so busy, fill our lives with so many diversions, stuff our heads with so much knowledge, involve ourselves with so many people and cover so much ground that we never have time to probe the fearful and wonderful world within...By middle life most of us are accomplished fugitives from ourselves.

(John W. Gardner)

3. From Conceptual Idea to Perceiving Directly

An example from my life, where I held an *initial conceptual idea* that helped me to *perceive something directly* later, is as follows:

In the fall of 1990, my wife and I had the opportunity to visit her homeland – the former Czechoslovakia. The infamous Iron Curtain had fallen only a year prior to our visit. We saw a land that had suffered to a degree under its previous regime. After 40 years of Communism, the people of Czechoslovakia were able to embrace democracy and freedom. During that unforgettable visit, a *conceptual idea or seed* was planted in my mind: I dreamed of my wife and I being of service to a people who had had limited freedoms.

Three years later, in the spring of 1993, having resigned from our work in the West and sold our home, we arrived in Prague. Before long, I *directly perceived the reality of the concept* I had had in my mind to be of service. Our expertise in teaching, writing, translating, and interpreting were soon in demand – and we found ourselves serving people who had lived for 40 years under an authoritarian regime.

Another example follows:

Several years ago, a couple in our area had the conceptual idea to start a company that would service people's outdoor swimming pools. Today, we can directly perceive their successful company with a building, personnel, and equipment – and providing top quality, professional service for maintaining home swimming pools.

4. Three Marks of Existence

The most basic tenets of Buddhism are the three marks of existence (in the later Buddhist texts, four seals are mentioned; *marks* and *seals* have the same connotation):

- a. *All compounded (compositional) phenomena are impermanent*: If a thing (material object or mental event) is created through causes and conditions – that is, if it is compounded – then it is impermanent.

Impermanent means that production, abiding, aging, and disintegration occur both *serially* and *simultaneously*. The first concept, *serially*, is what is normally accepted as impermanence – any object has a cause and hence is produced; it then remains for a period of time; but, sooner or later it ceases to exist. All things arise, abide, and disintegrate. The second concept, *simultaneously*, asserts that the process common to all impermanent things occurs concurrently at a subtler level – and there is no sequence of arising, abiding, and disintegrating. There is no single moment in the existence of an object when it is not in the process of disintegration on a subtle level; at the very moment of coming into existence, it disintegrates. Thus, the coming into existence and the disintegration are simultaneous – there is no time in which a phenomenon stays static. And so in this second view, impermanence means *changing moment by moment*. On a practical level, impermanence shows that our death is certain (yet our time of death is uncertain) – this makes us aware of how fragile our life is so we don't waste it. The subtler understanding helps us to better get to the bottom of our problems.

- b. *All contaminated phenomena (things) are, by nature, suffering*: Material objects or mental events come into existence due to causes and conditions. If those causes and conditions are in turn the products of a deluded mind, then those resultant things or events are contaminated and will unquestionably cause future suffering. Therefore, they are suffering by definition. No matter how beautiful or valuable a thing might be, it is suffering because it will sooner or later cause difficulties, pain, and misery.
- c. *All phenomena are empty of self-existence (selfless)*: The core of non-Buddhist philosophies was *atman*, or self – which asserted a permanent, unitary, and unchanging self that went from life to life. The Buddha was truly revolutionary in his first teaching by asserting *anatman*, no-self or selflessness.

At the relative (or conventional) level, we are usually not mistaken when we view objects. However, it is our inability to see their interconnectedness which is the cause of all our problems.

Seeing objects as concrete, discrete, independent, existing from their own side, without causes is a mistaken worldview – and can bring suffering and become dangerous, especially when the object is the sense of self.

Having a correct concept of the self is probably the most important tool on the path to awakening. Of course, the Buddha did not hesitate to talk as if the person really existed – he used the pronouns I, we, they, and so on, that we all use in conversation. We work at a relative (conventional), superficial level every day, and at that level, of course the "I" exists. The majority of the Buddha's teachings are at this level – they are advice to help us become better people. Conventionally, we exist, make mistakes, suffer, and so on. On another level, the substantial, singular, permanent "I" does not exist – and that is what Buddhism challenges.

Finally, arriving at a right view is critical. Right view in Buddhism encompasses the whole wisdom side of the Buddha's teachings. Right view can be explained on many different levels: the understanding of cause and effect, of cyclic existence, of the mode of existence of phenomena, and so on. One of the most important aspects of right view is understanding the correct mode of existence of all the phenomena that make up universe, particularly our sense of identity. In this context, one finds the term *emptiness* (Skt. *shunyata*) – and "wisdom realizing emptiness" – used in Buddhism.

- d. *Nirvana is true peace*: The Buddha taught that a state of true peace – *nirvana* – is possible. Nirvana does not refer to a place or a state of mind, but simply to the mere absence of suffering and its causes. (In the earlier Pali texts, such as the *Dhammapada*, this fourth mark is missing.)

In sum, the key concepts of the four seals are: (1) impermanence, (2) suffering, (3) selflessness, and (4) peace.

5. Three Natures of an Object (or Three Types of Perception)

According to one of the influential schools of Buddhism (Cittamatra; also known as Yogacarin), there are three basic modes by which we perceive our world – or, three natures of perception. In other words, all phenomena have all three of these natures (three ways of being). Every object of experience is characterized by three distinct but interdependent natures.

a. *Dependent nature*: All impermanent phenomena are the result of causes and conditions, that is, they are "other dependent" or "other-powered". Here the dependently originated nature of things is correctly understood.

b. *Imputed nature*: This includes imputing properties and values onto an object that it does not have. In other words, it is an "imaginary nature" because of the conceptualization involved – and so things are incorrectly comprehended. Also involved can be the false distinction of subject and object that is superimposed onto the object by the mind.

c. *Perfect nature*: This involves understanding the "absolute nature" of things – that is, to comprehend things as they are in themselves, and not being influenced by conceptualization. Also included is recognizing that ultimately no subject-object duality exists. This non-duality is the perfect, or thoroughly established, nature of the object.

The following is a helpful summary of the three natures adapted from a paper written by Roger Zim entitled "Basic Ideas of Yogacara Buddhism":

The theory of the three natures is one of the central concepts of Yogacara philosophy. Although there is just one world, it can be perceived in three ways. Hence, the three natures are also known as the "three characteristics". The three natures are a perspective on experience. All three natures are involved in direct perception and represent all phenomena without exception.

(1) *Dependent nature*: The other-dependent or interdependent nature is the basis from which the imaginary nature arises and the perfected nature appears. The other-dependent nature arises from causes and conditions. These dharmas are real (as conditional things). However, we tend to impose an imaginary 'self-existence' upon our experience of them. As a result, we come up with distorted views things. This causes suffering (samsara), since our mental constructs do not match reality. Analogy: The other-dependent nature is the mirage itself.

(2) *Imputed nature*: The imaginary nature is constructed of subject/object discriminations. It is the nature that accepts the reality of the "self".

In Yogacara theory all objects, internal and external, are constructs which only exist as part of our awareness, so their nature is imaginary. There is no reality in this nature; it is just illusion. This nature accepts the validity of the illusory. For example, happiness depends on having a new car. Analogy: The imaginary nature believes in the reality of the water in a mirage.

(3) *Perfect nature*: The perfected or fulfilled nature is the ultimate nature; the only one that is absolutely real. However, it is neither the same as, nor different, from the other-dependent. The perfected nature is devoid of duality and sees the world as "representation only". Since it is always exactly the same, it is the "thusness" of all. Analogy: The perfected nature knows it is seeing a mirage. To see the inter-relationship of our mind processes – that is, the other-dependent nature as being without real objective qualifications of its own (imaginary nature) – is to be enlightened (perfected nature). Once the false concept of "I" and "object" is removed, the result is "things-as-they-are", which is nirvana.

In sum, instead of using the teaching of the two truths to understand reality (including emptiness), the Yogacarins used the concept of the "three natures". Things and events have a dependent nature – they depend for their existence on a series of causes and conditions. The unreal aspect of things and events is due to the concepts imposed on the flow of experience. The real aspect of experience is the mind itself, devoid of all imaginary concepts (which can be termed emptiness). The Yogacarins believed in the reality of the mind – only the imaginary fabrications of the mind are unreal.

To understand the Yogacarin teaching of three natures, a dream analogy can be helpful: Dependent nature can be compared to a dream. All the images in the dream are unreal. However, the mind that does the dreaming is real.

Finally, here is a further summary of the three natures:

1. *Dependent Nature – the Mind/Object Relationship*

Everything operates on the base of *causal flow* – the universe being dictated by the creation and ripening of karmic seeds. Every mind moment is laden with karmic seeds – some being created by mental/verbal/physical actions; others are ripening. This is due to causes and conditions.

The *dependent nature* is that which arises in our consciousness from causal flow and is apprehended as two polarities – the subject (mind) and the object (the object apprehended by the mind). In other words, it is the flow of consciousness from which the *subjective* and *objective* aspects arise.

In the Cittamatrīn view, a very *strong connection* exists between consciousness and an object (for example, the eye and a pen). One's experience of a pen, and the pen itself, are actually the same entity – there is no difference between the two. *Subject and object are one entity*. Subject and object both arise from the single flow of experience. Dependent nature includes all impermanent phenomena.

2. *Imputed Nature – Imputations Placed on the Mind/Object Relationship*

The imputed nature is where the mind and its object appear as two separate, unconnected things. We *impute separateness* onto subject and object which are one entity.

The apparent distinction between subject and object that is due to the conceptual, habituated aspect of one's mind is a mistaken view. We *assume* that objects exist separate from the mind. However, investigating objects involves the mind – knowledge has a subjective element. No object of knowledge exists apart from the mind experiencing it.

In this connection, we have a "grasper" which is the *mind* that grasps the object. The "grasped" is the *object* grasped by the mind.

We see that the mind is inextricably involved with external objects – and this is also the case with *mental objects*, such as the all-important concept of "I". In reality, object and mind are one entity.

Our imputations include this subject/object separation, internal verbalizing, labelling, judging, and other *conceptual minds*.

When we analyze this further, there are two imputed natures:

- a. Nonexistent imputed nature – (i) subject and object seen as different entities; (ii) objects seen as established by their own character; (iii) objects that have no existence at all (e.g. horns of a rabbit).
- b. Existent imputed nature – permanent phenomena, that is, not produced by causes and conditions.

3. *Perfect Nature*

Perfect nature is seen when the perceiving of duality between an object and the way the mind conceives the object finally breaks down. However, this only occurs when a person has realized a very advanced state of mind. Another name for this nature is *thoroughly established*.

Meditation: As the mind becomes more subtle through meditation, the gap between reality and illusion narrows. The veil that the mind throws over an object gets thinner. An example is meditating on one's own body – eventually "body" and "mind meditating on body" will become one. Through meditation, the sense of the object being "out there" ceases; the object that we are meditating on becomes like part of the mind itself, and we have thoroughly established the lack of duality between subject and object.

In our present condition, we carry karmic baggage that includes lifetimes of conceiving objects as being independently and externally existent – and so we instinctively see an object and the mind perceiving the object as two separate things.

Emptiness: Is the absence of the subject-object duality (not the absence of essence). Realizing the absence of duality between subject and object is the emptiness that a *bodhisattva* must realize in order to attain full enlightenment.

Realization of selflessness of persons: There is no self-sufficient person in any way. This is sufficient for removing the obscurations to liberation.

6. *Realization of selflessness of phenomena:* This is required for removing the obscurations to omniscience, which is needed to reach buddhahood.

In closing, Yogacara was probably the most popular and influential of philosophical schools in ancient India associated with Mahayana.

Among those Buddhists who knew of the teaching of emptiness, many felt that on the Madhyamika interpretation it nevertheless must entail nihilism, since it cannot be that literally everything is a conceptual construct, since there would then be nothing left for things to be constructed out of. According to Yogacara, it is a misunderstanding of emptiness to take it as meaning that literally *all* things are conceptual constructs. In Yogacara, a mentalistic factor ('Mind') is the one primary existent that serves as the substratum for everything else. The antidote to nihilism is said to be the "three natures". The first is the 'constructed nature'. It is polarisation into separate subjects confronting separate objects, the realm of subject-object duality.

This cannot actually be correct. Duality is a wrenching apart of what is in reality a unity, one basic 'substance'. The second nature is the 'dependent nature'. It is the flow of cognitive experiences, the substratum, that *which* is erroneously polarised into subjects and objects. It could not be the case that this flow does not exist at all – there is really no substratum – or there would be no experiences at all and therefore there would be nothing. The 'perfected nature' is the true way of things, which has to be seen in meditation. It is also said to be emptiness. But in Yogacara texts, emptiness is redefined to mean that the substratum which must exist in order for there to be anything at all is *empty of* subject-object duality. The perfected nature is hence defined as the very absence of the constructed nature in the dependent nature. (Williams, Paul, Anthony Tribe, and Alexander Wynne. *Buddhist Thought: A Complete Introduction to the Indian Tradition*. 2d ed. London: Routledge, 2012. Pages 122-123.)

6. The Two Truths and the Three Natures

The link between the Three Natures and the Two Truths can be illustrated with a table as follows:

Three Natures and the Two Truths		
<i>Three Natures</i>	<i>Nature of Existence</i>	<i>Two Truths</i>
dependent nature	truly existent	conventional truth
imputed nature	conceptually constructed	conventional truth
perfect nature	truly existent	ultimate truth

Dependent nature and perfect nature truly exist, because they are *facts*. In contrast, imputed nature is fiction, unreal, because it is only conceptually constructed; thus, it does not truly exist.

Dependent nature and imputed nature are both conventional truths because their nature is the opposite of perfect nature. When the mind observes them, instead of purifying the mind, it increases the negativities, ignorance, and so forth.

Conventional Truth: Dependent nature is a relative truth; imputed nature is also a relative truth. Dependent nature is *truly existent* – it is based on facts; they are real. Imputed nature is *not* truly existent – it is fiction, unreal, because it is only conceptually constructed; thus it does not truly exist.

Focusing the mind on dependent nature and imputed nature will not lead to a complete cessation of suffering because they do not have the five characteristics of ultimate truth (described on the next page). In fact, reliance on the imputed and dependent natures leads only to more confusion and suffering. That is, when the mind observes them, instead of purifying the mind, as mentioned, it increases the negativities, ignorance, and so forth.

Ultimate truth has five characteristics:

1. Inexpressible: It is impossible to verbally describe ultimate truth precisely.
 2. Nondual: Within the realization of an *arya* (a superior being who has gained a direct realization of emptiness) there is no differentiation – no duality – of subject and object.
 3. Beyond apprehension by the conceptual mind: It cannot be realized by ordinary people's cognition, but only by the direct perception of an *arya* being.
 4. Beyond diversity: Ultimate truth of an object is not one with its dependent nature, which has many "diversities" – different factors such as production, result, causes, conditions, etc. All diversities cease.
 5. All of one taste: The ultimate truth of an object is the absence of duality of subject and object. Tables, chairs, and so on are different objects, but their ultimate truth is the same. Their final mode of existence is also the mere absence of duality of subject and object.
- In sum, the ultimate truths of all phenomena are all of one taste.

When a practitioner focuses on an object's *perfect nature*, delusions and ignorance are purified, and continued concentration on the perfect nature leads the practitioner to the complete cessation of suffering.

7. Eight Types of Consciousness (Yogacarīn view)

The Eight Consciousnesses was a classification developed by the Yogacara school of Buddhism and consists of: the five senses, the mind, defilements of the mind, and the basic store-house consciousness, which is the basis of the other seven. The eight types of consciousness, then, are:

Five sense-consciousnesses:

1. Visual consciousness
2. Auditory consciousness
3. Smell consciousness
4. Taste consciousness
5. Tactile consciousness

Mental consciousness:

6. Mind consciousness (perception) – intellect consciousness – directs the consciousnesses of the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and body to engage in various activities. This creates positive or negative karma.

Two other consciousnesses:

7. Self-consciousness – also known as the "afflictive mental consciousness" – is always focused on the self, and is therefore the origin of selfishness, attachment, and ignorance. It ascribes the sense of self onto whatever action is done (and hence is the cause of all afflictions). The afflictive mental consciousness is the sense of "I" that we carry around with us all the time. It is the continual sense of a permanent, unitary self that underpins and motivates our whole world. However, it is *not* a unitary, independent entity. We continue life after life, and our karma continues to ripen life after life, because the mind-basis-of-all is the mechanism that carries our sense of self. The afflictive mental consciousness is also called *I-maker* because this is the mind that firmly believes that the "I" really exists and is the source of all the internal egoistic dialogue. The afflictive mental consciousness continues until we become enlightened, but it becomes weaker and weaker as we progress toward enlightenment (and as we burn off the seeds of unenlightenment). This afflicted mind is the real cause of our problems – it is the screen that filters everything we experience, the internal discursive conversation that forever runs through our life.

In a way, it is obsessed with various aspects and notions of "self," and the term "afflictive mental consciousness" is fitting.

8. Mind-basis-of-all consciousness – functions as a base where karmic seeds are stored. It is a consciousness which is *non-material, clear, and knowing*. The specific nature of the mind-basis-of-all is that it is neutral – so that as a base for karmic seeds, it will not taint them with any bias (virtuous or non-virtuous). The five always-present mental factors (contact, discernment, feeling, intention, attention) are copresent, but no other factors. Since the mind-basis-of-all must be neutral, all other mental factors are eliminated. The mind-basis-of-all is a suitable base for apprehending the "I" (not the aggregates which are absorbed at death). The "I" abides within the mind-basis-of-all. This consciousness has been called the "storehouse consciousness", because it stores up all the positive and negative karma one creates.

The eighth consciousness is a "warehouse consciousness", according to Venerable Dr. Yifa who has been a nun at Fo Guang Shan Monastery in Taiwan since 1979. In an article entitled "Eight Consciousnesses, What Is and Isn't Yogacara", she writes that this eighth consciousness operates in several ways. It is the receptacle of all seeds, storing experiences as they "enter" until they are sent back out as new experiences, like a warehouse handles goods. It is also a consciousness allowing the "maturing" of karmic seeds. Seeds gradually mature in the repository consciousness until karmically ripe, at which point they reassert themselves as karmic consequences. Finally, it is also called the "basic consciousness" since it retains and deploys the karmic seeds that both influence and are influenced by the other seven consciousnesses. When, for instance, the sixth consciousness is dormant (while one sleeps, or is unconscious, etc.), its seeds reside in the eighth consciousness, and they "restart" when the conditions for their arising are present. The eighth consciousness is largely a mechanism for storing and deploying seeds of which it remains largely unaware. Warehouse Consciousness acts as the pivotal karmic mechanism, but is itself karmically neutral.

Each individual has its own Warehouse Consciousness which perdures from moment to moment and life to life, though, being nothing more than a collection of ever-changing "seeds," it is continually changing and therefore not a permanent self. There is no universal collective mind in Yogācāra.

(Source – <http://venyifa.blogspot.com.au/2008/10/eight-consciousnesses-what-is-and-isnt.html>)

Consciousness is the essence of our lives, for it is never destroyed nor is it ever lost.

8. Two Bodies Resulting from Realization of Two Truths

Each of the two truths can be seen as the cause for each of the two aspects of the spiritual path – the practices of *method* and *wisdom*. An understanding of relative, or conventional, truth leads to the cultivation of the method side – compassion, ethics, and so on. An understanding of ultimate truth leads to the wisdom side.

Finally, when these two aspects have been developed to perfection, and the results of the path are realized, the method side becomes the cause of the *form body* of a buddha, while the wisdom side becomes the cause of the *truth body*. This may be illustrated as follows:

The two bodies that result from the realization of the Two Truths may be further described as follows.

Upon full enlightenment (not just liberation from cyclic existence), the practitioner attains the two bodies of a buddha – (1) form body (Skt. *rupakaya*) and (2) truth body (Skt. *dharmakaya*).

The form body (*rupakaya*) refers to the form in which a Buddha manifests in order to help sentient beings. It may be understood in terms of the enjoyment body (Skt. *sambhogakaya*) and emanation body (Skt. *nirmanakaya*). The *sambhogakaya* is a more subtle, 'non-material' kind of form that cannot generally be perceived by ordinary beings like ourselves. The *nirmanakaya* refers to what we would normally think of as the physical body, that is, the usual representations of Buddha Shakyamuni, in human form wearing monk's robes.

The truth body (*dharmakaya*) is a Buddha's mind that has realized emptiness. It may be understood in terms of the wisdom truth body (Skt. *jnanakaya*) and natural truth body (Skt. *svabhavikakaya*).

Note: Here are some other definitions:

Liberation: Is nothing other than the total elimination, or cessation, of delusion and suffering through the insight into emptiness. With liberation, only the obscurations of defilements have to be overcome.

Cessation: May be described as absolute truth, ultimate reality, *arhatship*, ultimate truth, emptiness, liberation from *samsara*, liberation from cyclic existence, nirvana, total elimination of delusion, cessation of suffering through the insight into emptiness.

Enlightenment: The obscurations to knowledge, as well as the obscurations of defilements, have to be overcome.

Two Truths and Two Buddha Bodies		
The two truths (the base)	<i>Conventional</i> truth (how phenomena exist and operate on this conventional, worldly level)	<i>Ultimate</i> truth (how phenomena exist at the deepest level)
The two practices (the path)	Method – the method side produces the <i>form</i> body	Wisdom – the wisdom side produces the <i>truth</i> body.
The two buddha bodies (the result)	Form body (the activities of an enlightened being). Bodhichitta, generosity, morality, and patience are all part of the method aspect of the path, which leads to the development of the form body of a buddha.	Truth body (the wisdom aspect of an enlightened being). Trying to achieve the wisdom that realizes emptiness and impermanence is the wisdom aspect, which leads to the development of the truth body.
Life	Intuitive, emotional aspect	Intelligent, logical aspect
After death (Mahayana tradition)	Person's now-purified form becomes the form body	Person's now-purified mental aggregates become the truth body – that is, the mind that realizes emptiness directly and is full of compassion (the mind of bodhichitta) becomes the truth body of a buddha.
Two aspects of each body	A person's gross physical aggregates dissolve, but the very subtle physical body becomes the base for the form body of the buddha a person will become. The form body (<i>rupakaya</i>) does not necessarily mean material form. It refers to how a buddha's omniscient mind of (1) wisdom and (2) compassion manifests in different forms.	Two aspects of the truth body (<i>dharmakaya</i>): (1) The mind realizing emptiness; (2) the actual emptiness of that mind.

Two types of body	Form body (<i>rupakaya</i>): (1) enjoyment body (<i>sambhogakaya</i>), as seen in Tibetan <i>tangka</i> paintings of buddhas in the <i>sambhogakaya</i> aspect, with beautiful robes and fine jewelry; (2) emanation body (<i>nirmanakaya</i>), as seen in the Buddha's normal representation as a monk in simple monk's robes, which is his <i>nirmanakaya</i> aspect. Note: The historical Buddha was a supreme emanation or <i>nirmanakaya</i> , because ordinary sentient beings were able to see him and receive teachings from him (Mahayana view).	Truth body (<i>dharmakaya</i>): (1) wisdom truth body, which is the mind of a buddha (<i>jnanakaya</i>); (2) natural truth body, which is the emptiness of the mind of a buddha (<i>svabhavakaya</i>).
When a person achieves enlightenment (Mahayana)	The two bodies – the form and truth bodies – manifest simultaneously. The form body is the form in which that being is perceived by others.	The two bodies – the truth and form bodies – manifest simultaneously. The truth body is the state of being free from obscurations.

Sources: (1) Tsering, Geshe Tashi. *Relative Truth, Ultimate Truth* (The Foundation of Buddhist Thought, Volume 2). Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2008. (2) Tsering, Geshe Tashi. *The Four Noble Truths* (The Foundation of Buddhist Thought, Volume 1). Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2005.

9. The Middle Way

What is the Middle Way the middle of?

In the Pali Canon, the term *Middle Way* is used by the Buddha in his first discourse to describe the Noble Eightfold Path as the way to achieve Nirvana – without the two extremes of self-mortification (austerities) and sensual self-indulgence.

The Buddha gave the Noble Eightfold Path the alternative name of the Middle Way (*Majjhima patipada*). In that first discourse or *Sutta* expounded by the Lord Buddha, the *Dhammacakka-pavattana Sutta* or the "Discourse on Setting in Motion the Wheel of Dhamma", the *Majjhima patipada* is explained thus:

There are these two extremes that are not to be indulged in by one who has gone forth. Which two? That which is devoted to sensual pleasure with reference to sensual objects: base, vulgar, common, ignoble, unprofitable; and that which is devoted to self-affliction: painful, ignoble, unprofitable. Avoiding both of these extremes, the middle way realized by the Tathagata – producing vision, producing knowledge – leads to calm, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to Unbinding. (Trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu)

Later, Pali literature also used the expression *Middle Way* relating to the Buddha's teaching on dependent origination – a view between the extremes of *eternalism* and *annihilationism*.

For the Cittamatra (Mind Only) school – the Yogacara school – the *Middle Way* is the middle way between the *realism* of the Vaibhashika school of thought and the *nihilism* of Madhyamaka.

For the Madhyamaka (*Middle Way*) school, its position lies between what it sees as the *eternalism* of the first two schools (Vaibhashika and Sautrantika) that see objects as existing from their own side, and the *nihilism* of the Cittamatra school that asserts that things and events have no reality at all. In other words, it is a middle way position between claims that things ultimately either exist or do not exist.

In the Samyutta Nikaya's *Kaccāyanagotta Sutta* it also states: "Everything exists': That is one extreme. 'Everything doesn't exist': That is a second extreme. Avoiding these two extremes, the Tathagata teaches the Dhamma via the middle . . ." (translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 1997).

10. Relative Truth Conceals Ultimate Truth

The Sanskrit word for conventional (relative) truth is *samvriti satya* – "that which entirely conceals reality" (Tibetan: *kundzob* – "all covered"). It is ignorance conceals reality. Therefore, the word *conventional* is used to mean that reality is covered. This can be explained as follows.

All "manufactured" things come into being existence due to causes and conditions – but seen by the ignorant mind as having a true nature (that is, being *causeless* and *independent*) that these things do not have. Therefore, such a mind conceals their actual mode of existence.

By *superimposing* a sense of true existence onto the object, the reality of the object is obscured. Therefore, it is a *concealer* truth – true for the ignorant mind, but concealing the ultimate truth of the object. In other words, things and events lack true existence, but the ignorant mind superimposes this true existence on top of their actual experience.

With this understanding, when we use the word *conventional*, there are two meanings we need to be aware of.

First, it is an ignorant (lacking understanding) consciousness that conceals reality. It refers to the ignorant mind that grasps on to things and events as if they exist truly – but which obscures or conceals the way things really are. (For the Madhyamaka subschools in Buddhism, it is the ignorance that covers everything, that deceives us about our entire existence.)

Secondly, it refers to worldly conventions (signifiers), that is, mundane nominal conventions. It is whatever is agreed upon as a truth by worldly conventions, and includes all our worldly knowledge. Relative or conventional *truth* is a truth because it works conventionally. One sees a book, and the mind registers "book". We are deceived, however, in that the object appears to us to be inherently existent, whereas it is not. (Logically, we can accept that a book has no intrinsic existence – but that is not how the object appears to us.)

In summary, ignorance conceals reality. A conventional truth or *concealer* truth – this "truth that conceals" – creates a fictitious world that works for us on a certain level. 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.

We conceptualize, however, our 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.

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.)

All things and events lack any intrinsic or inherent nature. However, confusion can arise regarding the difference between inherent existence and existence itself. To understand how things and events exist, it is necessary to differentiate between conventional *truth* and conventional *existence*.

Conventional existence – to exist *conventionally* is to exist dependent on causes and conditions. Ultimate existence – to exist *ultimately* is to exist truly independently – but, nothing exists that way. The *empty interdependence* is the mode of existence of all things – including all conventional and ultimate truths. (Ultimate existence and inherent existence are synonyms.)

An example from my own life to illustrate what has been described above follows. First, this quote: "Ignorance conceals nature, therefore it is conventional. What is created by this ignorance appears to be true." (From *Supplement to the Middle Way* by Chandrakirti)

For me, the best example is my own concept of intrinsic nature. Recently, I was in a situation where I was falsely accused. During the next few weeks, on and off, I felt miserable and tormented in mind, as I rehearsed the incident and what had led up to it. The sense of self was strong and intense – it *appeared* so true and real to me. During those moments, in my mind, it felt as though my sense of self was my true nature. Also, the other person seemed equally intrinsically real (in all their perceived meanness)!

In retrospect, I realize that I had fallen back into ignorance. All my Buddhist understanding had disappeared. I momentarily forgot that I have come into existence due to causes and conditions. I forgot that I am not causeless and independent. I forgot that I was superimposing a sense of true existence onto myself (the object), composed only of five impermanent aggregates: matter, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness.

In other words, my ignorant mind had concealed my actual mode of existence, the ultimate truth of "myself". Truly "ignorance conceals nature" as Chandrakirti penned about 1,400 years ago.

11. Three Criteria for Conventional Existence

To exist *conventionally* is to exist dependent on causes and conditions. 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:

1. *It is known to a conventional consciousness.* Conventional consciousness 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 of conventional consciousness exist, as will be seen in the second point.

2. *No other conventional consciousness (valid consciousness or valid reasoning) contradicts it being so known.* Some beliefs are erroneous and can be contradicted by valid reasoning (a valid consciousness). For example, it is possible for something to be known to a conventional consciousness, but does not actually exist. Many tourists to London go to Baker Street looking for Sherlock Holmes' house. Although some people may actually believe there was a Sherlock Holmes, and he is a very well-known "object of cognition", their belief is not valid. Although Sherlock Holmes is well known to the worldly mind, he does not exist.

A valid consciousness (valid reasoning) is needed to actually see this crucial difference between what does and what does not exist. Sherlock Holmes's existence can be disputed by a valid consciousness. In fact, there are many cultural things – philosophical or religious – that are based on the construction of conventional language and that are believed to exist but in reality do not. Another example follows: 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.

3. *Reason that accurately analyzes the reality of whether something inherently exists does not contradict it.* This third criterion matches the conventional consciousness with another consciousness that analyzes whether the object inherently exists or not. In an example, Lama Tsongkhapa explains that an ultimate mind will not contradict the conventional assertion that pleasure and pain arise conventionally from positive and negative actions, whereas it will contradict the conventional assertion that pleasure and pain arise from a creator god or primal essence.

In sum, not only must something be an object of a conventional consciousness, but that consciousness must not be invalidated by another conventional valid cognition, nor by a mind analyzing its final mode of existence, its emptiness. Anything that fails to meet these criteria is non-existent.

12. Realizing the Two Truths

In his *Supplement to the Middle Way*, Chandrakirti (chpt. 6) states that correctly and fully understanding the two truths (as explained by Nagarjuna) is critical to experiencing peace.

There is a sequence involved: 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.

The question is 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. It must be noted that 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 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 occurs as follows: 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.

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.

13. Importance of the Two Truths

Understanding the two truths is essential for the path. Conventional truth enables one to develop the *method* side – compassion, concentration, and ethics; ultimate truth leads one to realize the *wisdom* side – emptiness.

These realizations will result in the two buddha bodies – *truth* body (from wisdom) and *form* body (from method).

Ignorance of the two truths means one is in an unenlightened state. Again, the path to enlightenment involves developing both method and wisdom.

Interestingly, the sixteen aspects of the Four Noble Truths and the six perfections are presented from the view of the two truths.

To be free from suffering, one needs to cultivate an understanding of reality – the wisdom of ultimate truth, as well as develop the method side of the practice, which entails a thorough understanding of conventional truth.

Finally, statements by masters from Nagarjuna to His Holiness the Dalai Lama emphasize the importance of the two truths.

A deep understanding of both *how things appear* to us – conventional truth – and *how they exist* – ultimate truth – is needed to really free us from our most deep-seated problems.

14. Ultimate Truth

Ultimate truth is the final mode of existence of all phenomena. The core of many definitions is that an ultimate truth is an object found by a valid consciousness that realizes the ultimate.

Emptiness is called an ultimate truth for the following reasons: (1) it is an object because it is findable by a wisdom in meditative equipoise; (2) it is ultimate because it is the object's real mode of existence; (3) it is a truth because there is concordance between its appearance and its mode of existence.

For example: The human body, when not analyzed, instinctively appears to one as a single, causeless entity. Whereas when one does analyze it, one sees that it is nothing more than a label placed on a collection of constantly changing parts, each a product of causes and conditions, and so it lacks any true, concrete, inherent existence whatsoever!

The human body, when analyzed, is an object because it is findable by a wisdom in meditative equipoise – this ultimate truth is an object because it can be found by an ultimate mind analyzing *suchness*. It is not ultimate because of the object's real mode of existence – this lack of inherent existence is the actual mode of existence of the object, the body. It is a truth because there is concordance between its appearance and its mode of existence – the mind that realizes that mode of existence is completely free from any fault regarding the object, so this is its ultimate truth.

15. 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.

In *Supplement to the Middle Way*, Chandrakirti states: "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". *All* things and events have these two aspects.

A perceiver of reality, then, would also be 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*.

By contrast, 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:

- a. Subject: A writer
- b. Object: A book
- c. 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.

There are two stages (or phases) of ultimate mind:

- a. Analytical stage: The conceptual mind analyzes the ultimate mode of existence of things and events.
- b. 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.

The process may be described as follows: It 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.

16. The Relationship between the Two Truths

According to the Madhyamaka school of Buddhism, there is a subtle line between illusion and reality – in other words, relative truth and ultimate truth are closely and intimately related.

For any phenomenon, its relative truth and ultimate truth represent different aspects of that phenomenon. For a book, for example, the object itself is the relative truth, and its emptiness is the ultimate truth. And so, conventional truth and ultimate truth are *not* the same – they are mutually exclusive. A body, for example, has two truths – it *is* a conventional truth, but it *has* an ultimate truth.

There is no phenomenon that is *both* a conventional truth and an ultimate truth – implying that any phenomenon that exists must be either one or the other. There is nothing that is both, and there is nothing that is neither.

Mutually exclusive: At present, we see all things as existing intrinsically; therefore, we cannot see that they are empty of intrinsic or inherent existence. When we have developed sufficiently and can perceive emptiness directly, we will be able to see all things as lacking inherent existence, and hence will no longer see things as existing inherently. By realizing the lack of inherent existence, inherent existence is excluded.

The sense of "I" is an example of mutual exclusivity. Because conventional truth and ultimate truth are mutually exclusive, while our mind is realizing the conventional reality of our sense of "I", at that moment the ultimate reality of our sense of "I" cannot arise, and vice versa. When we reach a stage where we realize the final mode of existence of our "I" – which is its absence of inherent existence, its emptiness, or ultimate truth – we cannot simultaneously have a mind that realizes the conventional reality of our "I".

The process of understanding impermanence happens slowly, through effort, with moments of realization becoming gradually more prevalent. Slowly, we will come to know the impermanence of our body or our sense of "I", and slowly we will lose our habit of grasping on to its permanence as the opposing habit becomes stronger.

As another example, a magician knows the tricks he is using, but the audience is fooled into thinking that his illusions are real.

As long as we grasp at an object, its appearance and its real existence will always be discordant with one another, and there will never be any room for them to match up.

Many masters, such as Nagarjuna, state that enormous fear arises as one's sense of "I" and its real mode of existence become closer. As one's meditation takes one closer to the way the "I" actually exists, the conventional sense of "I" diminishes. The false grasping at a sense of intrinsic identity creates a fear as we feel we are losing our identity and becoming non-existent. We have clung to a false sense of "I" since beginningless time. It feels like we are becoming nothing when all that is happening is that the appearance of the object and its actual mode of existence are becoming closer.

17. Illusion and Reality

The *King of Concentration Sutra* takes a *magician's illusion*, a *dream*, and an *echo* as examples of the confusion between appearance and reality. All of these exist conventionally. In fact, everyday objects deceive us because the conditions are there for things to appear to have an intrinsic nature that they don't actually have.

The verses in *King of Concentration Sutra* draw our attention to the fundamental fact of phenomenal existence – how our confused mind grasps at a substantial reality of things, although in actual fact things are empty of inherent being.

As a result, there is a discernible degree of fictionalizing in our everyday reality – the object is *there*, and our understanding is *here*; we never quite see things as they actually are (even whether we get close to the truth, or are miles from it).

In this context, the Tibetan masters urge us to see all things as *illusion-like*. They do *not* suggest we see life as an illusion – life is *not* a dream with no reality at all. Yet, it is *like* a dream, in that we create the fiction. Nevertheless, life is not as black and white as it appears. Reality is not as real as it seems, nor is illusion quite as unreal. We need to let go of that sense of concrete reality and see all things as *illusion-like*.

Let's take the example of a book: It appears as a book to our mind when somebody has bound the pages together and we conventionally agree that this is a book, nothing more. However, there is nothing from the book's side that defines it as a book.

Karmic imprints: That things appear in a certain way because of karmic imprints is illustrated by the example of a dream. Dreams are not real, but most of the time, they have a strong connection with our life. In the same way, we misconceive reality because we have had karmic seeds from many lifetimes. We are so familiar with seeing everything as *inherently existent* that we keep seeing things in the same way; it is our deepest habit.

Dream analogy: The man desiring his dream-lover illustrates that we are deceived by our emotions – although lacking any real existence, the dream-woman takes on significance only because of his desire. Similarly, the joy and grief that a woman feels for her dream-son, shows us the insubstantiality of the objects of our attachment, aversion, and ignorance.

Echo analogy: The echo symbolizes our own habitual tendency to see things as existing independently.

Reification of "I": The fundamental need to reify the "I" ("reify" means to treat a concept as an object; to think of or treat something abstract as if it existed as a real and tangible object) causes us to see everything as inherently existent.

A sense of permanence: We develop attachment, aversion, hatred, grief, and so on, all the time – based on a sense of permanence that is actually divorced from reality. We want things to be permanent – so we see them that way.

Appearance versus reality: The world we live in – our body, our possessions, the buildings, and streets of our town – seem to be very real. It is difficult for us to understand that they do *not* exist as they appear to us.

Water reflection analogy: From the ultimate perspective, there is no difference between the reflection of our face and our real face, between what from our worldly perspective we would call "illusion" and "reality" – both are equally conventionally existent: one as a reflection, one as a face. There is no difference between them in the way they exist.

Understanding emptiness: To understand this discordance between appearance and reality, on the level we are talking about here, requires an understanding of *emptiness* – only with such understanding will we be able to see that appearance is the sense of intrinsic existence, whereas reality is the lack of intrinsic existence.

Levels of understanding: There are different levels of understanding we must all pass through to get a deeper understanding of emptiness – one's study of the four schools of Indian Buddhism helps achieve this.

Final mode of existence of an object: This is the lack of inherent existence from its own side. It is this truth that has to penetrate to a deeper level.

Traditional example of the coiled rope and the snake: Attachment, aversion, and ignorance all stem from the same kind of misunderstanding.

Value of understanding: Knowing how people, actions, and events exist conventionally, makes it possible to understand the four noble truths on a very profound level – and this understanding helps us to generate compassion and so on.

Misapprehension and suffering: We all share this illness of fictionalizing the world we live in. All suffering arises from this misapprehension, and if we can see this, we will stop ascribing good and bad, and meting out our compassion only to those we feel deserve it.

Understanding the process of life: Differentiating between the fiction that our conceptual mind creates and the reality of our life will help us understand the process of all things and events, how they go together, how they work together.

Final wisdom: Why is the only true mind one that recognizes the *absence* of independent existence of the object? Because that mind is the only one that is *free from fault*. That is why we use the word *emptiness*. The final wisdom realizes the lack of intrinsic existence of whatever object it is meditating on – the body, the "I", an external object, even emptiness itself. There is no fault at all in that wisdom.

18. Emptiness

In Madhyamaka, emptiness is derived from *dependent origination*. All things, without exception, are akin to illusions because all things are without intrinsic nature. All things are only secondary existents, conceptual constructs. They are so because they are the results of causes and conditions, they are dependently-originated.

Anything that is the result of causes and conditions must of course lack its own *intrinsic* existence and hence its own intrinsic nature. Because even *dharmas* (phenomena/things/factors of reality) originate due to causes and conditions, they too must be empty of primary, substantial existence.

Nagarjuna applies analytic investigation to some of the principal categories of Buddhist thought as well as those of non-Buddhists, such as causation itself, movement, time, the Buddha, nirvana, as well as the Self. He declares *emptiness whenever anything is found to be the result of some sort of causal process*. In this way, the assertions of complete emptiness 'like an illusion' in the Prajnaparamita sutras can be demonstrated through reasoning. However, this is not the same as saying everything simply does not exist at all.

Since emptiness is an implication of dependent origination, for something to be empty entails that such a thing must in some sense *exist*.

The Prajnaparamita (Perfection of Wisdom) literature consists of sutras, commonly named by the number of verses. Two key doctrines in this literature are as follows.

(1) *Prajna* (wisdom): this is the state of mind that comes from properly understanding how things really are, in contrast to the way they appear to be.

(2) Emptiness (*sunyata*): this entails that absolutely everything is 'like a magical illusion'. Nothing can be found, nothing can be grasped. Enlightenment comes from ceasing to grasp even the most subtle sources of attachment, and this ceasing to grasp requires seeing those things which could serve as sources of attachment as empty, mere conceptual constructs. *Nothing* must be grasped. *All* things are empty.

Note: *The Buddha-nature (tathagatagarbha)*: this teaching in Indian Mahayana is concerned with that factor possessed by each sentient being (i.e. the *tathagatagarbha*) which enables him or her to become a fully enlightened Buddha. In the *Tathagatagarbha Sutra*, the Buddha teaches that hidden within the defilements of each sentient being is 'the tathagata's wisdom, the tathagata's vision, and the tathagata's body . . . eternally unsullied, and . . . replete with virtues no different from my own'. This topic concerns religious issues of realising one's spiritual potential, and exhortation and encouragement, rather than ontology. Discussions on how to interpret what this factor might be have continued to the present day. (Williams, Paul, Anthony Tribe, and Alexander Wynne. *Buddhist Thought: A Complete Introduction to the Indian Tradition*. 2d ed. London: Routledge, 2012. Pages 122-123.)

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My notes in this handout came as result of preparing for a final review of an online course entitled "The Two Truths". It is part of the Foundation of Buddhist Thought program which is a two-year course. Its special quality is that the teacher, Geshe Tashi Tsering, draws on the depth of Tibetan Buddhist philosophy to show how Buddhism can make a real difference to the way we live our lives today. For this reason the course is structured into six four-month modules: (1) The Four Noble Truths; (2) The Two Truths; (3) Buddhist Psychology and Epistemology; (4) The Mind of Enlightenment (Bodhicitta); (5) Emptiness According to Prasangika Madhyamaka; (6) An Overview of Tantric Paths and Grounds.

Further information may be obtained from
<http://www.fbtstudycentre.jamyang.co.uk/>

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