

Essays on the Middle Way

A New Telling of Vital Truths

By Jason Espada

## Preface to two volumes on the Middle Way

For years I have had my favorite selections on the Middle Way teachings in one large folder. They were in the form of photocopies from books, together with my own essays. Eventually I decided to separate the two, and the first volume, *Readings on the Middle Way*, has passages for study and reflection by some of my favorite Buddhist teachers.

This is a profound subject, and one that can often feel inaccessible to the average reader. As with my other writings, my motivation then has been twofold: to have the Dharma be clear in my own mind, and to help others to appreciate and make use of liberating teachings.

I have gathered my writings on this subject, and I offer them here as *Essays on the Middle Way - A New Telling of Vital Truths*.

*May all beings benefit*

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*Mist armies pose as real, and lasting,  
but fade as my honied laughter dawns...*

## Preface

### Requisites for the Practice of the Middle Way

When we speak of requisites in Buddhism, these are the foundations that allow us to experience beneficial results in practice. When it comes to wisdom practice, *we need a good deal of calm meditation* for these methods to be effective, and in turn, keeping good ethics are what allow the mind to settle, with clarity and ease. Without these, we may have an intellectual understanding of the teachings, but that alone is not enough to free our mind from the causes of suffering. Please see for yourself just how much sila, morality, and meditation you need for these teachings to have their full effect.

The teachings on shinay or calm abiding, and the jhanas each have detailed instructions on cultivating calm with clarity. {See *A Resource for the Practice of Meditation.*}

Some people are satisfied with just having a conceptual understanding of Buddhist wisdom teachings. This is fine, as far as it goes. At some point in the future, they may take up the beautiful practice of meditation, and then the familiarity those teachings can really bear fruit. As Ajahn Maha Boowa taught, sometimes insight-wisdom leads, and meditation follows, and sometimes meditation leads, and wisdom follows, but we shouldn't think, as scholars and intellectuals often do, that conceptual understanding alone is all there is to this subject.

Another requisite is needed when we take the approach to liberating wisdom practice of using reason, and the cultivated strength of discernment. *We need also a good deal of positive emotion*, manifest either as a part of our character already, or as something we work on to develop.

The inherited wisdom on requisites is offered because others have made these mistakes in the past, or seen generations of students and fellow practitioners make them.

Without enough warmth, joy, kindness, gentleness, and patience, we very well may succeed in changing how we view concepts, and experience, but there will not be enough light present in the mind. The result of this kind of partial practice has often been a kind of nihilism, or withdrawal from the world.

{I go into the traditional basis for this balanced approach in one selection that follows, called 'From a letter on wisdom and compassion.'}

These requisites, it will be seen, are not only needed before we benefit from teachings, as a their foundation, but they should be maintained throughout the course of our study and practice for them to have their full effect in our lives.

If we choose not to believe what we hear or read from traditions, then of course we're welcomed to pursue these paths and see the results of different approaches for ourselves. These two pieces of advice on requisites are only offered here because I feel they can save a practitioner of these teachings valuable time. Is this not a crucial matter?



From a letter on wisdom and compassion

I just wanted to mention one thing you repeated in your short note- about what Goenka said about compassion developing naturally as a result of vipassana or insight- I think that, in all fairness, sometimes it happens like this, and sometimes not (otherwise all Arhats would be Bodhisattvas, and that's not yet the case).

Actually, this 'wisdom leading to compassion' is the approach in the Zen tradition, as well as in the Theravada, and also, to some extent, it is the approach taken by the lineages in Tibetan Buddhism that emphasize wisdom practice more first, on the way to a full, complete realization.

(Just a note here: The Tibetan word 'San-gye', 'Buddha', translates to 'completely purified- and fully developed', meaning that all faults have been removed (which is the cessation without remainder), and all positive qualities are brought forth, *actualized*.)

So, to get back to my point- if it is so that sometimes liberation, the freedom of mind, leads to the full development of love and compassion, and sometimes not, then why not? Why does it sometimes happen and sometimes not? This is so important for us to consider as individuals, and so important for our world, really.

And here's the best answer I can come up with so far- First, there are different temperaments, so that in any one system or approach one person will flourish fully, accomplishing all the different aspects of development, while another person may need other instruction, and to engage in other practices to achieve the same thing.

Then, I've found the following teaching very useful to explain what is happening in any case. In the Tibetan tradition, they speak of 'the two obscurations' that keep us from seeing the truth of what is here. The first type is what they call the 'conceptual obscurations', or the 'obscurations of

conceptual thought' (wrong views). These are corrected, or cleared away by samatha and vipassana- the quieting of the mind and cultivation of the strength of discernment- discriminating between the true and the false.

The Theravada, Zen, and Tibetan traditions that practice non-conceptual meditation clear away this type of obscuration, the obscuration of conceptual thought, very effectively.

But what happens, quite often as it turns out, - it's the characteristic possible sidetrack to this approach- is that the other type of obscuration, called 'the obscuration of afflictive emotions' (kilesa nivvana) is not always fully removed. Sometimes I've been calling these 'the qualitative obscurations'. And the all too common result is that people end up with a partial experience of the view of emptiness, or egolessness, one with the wrong concepts cleared away- but it is a cold, dark, meaningless, nihilistic experience, one that is lacking in the sense of worth, of the beauty and richness of what is here.

The emotional obscurations are cleared away by the development of all the qualities that we associate with the good heart: the development of love and compassion, gentleness, patience, forgiveness, humility, honesty, gratitude, joy, generosity... These change the quality of the mind so that when the conceptual obscuration are removed as well, the experience is warm; the mind is bright, appreciative, and loving; and the feeling is one of richness, of the great value of life.

The no-self teachings of the Buddha are further expressed in the Prajnaparamita Sutras, and the Middle Way is a further explanation of those teachings. The term 'Middle Way' refers to 'being free of the two extremes', the extreme of eternalism (ego-grasping), and the extreme of nihilism. According to Middle Way philosophy, all the mistakes that people can have regarding the View fall into one of these two categories.

Right View is accomplished by removing the two obscurations, conceptual

and emotional, together with their seeds. So the development of love and the positive qualities of the heart are definitely an essential aspect of vipassana, or wisdom practice, seeing things fully as they actually are. Whether we arrive at this indirectly, or through our engaging in methods that directly cultivate both discernment and kindness, the need is there for everyone to have these elements present. That said, we should each practice what suits us best, and accomplishes a full result.

## From Anatta to the Middle Way

### From 'Notes from a Dharma Gypsy'

To briefly describe the history of Buddhist Wisdom teachings, we can refer simply to a few key words.

1.

Two thousand five hundred years ago, the historical Buddha taught *anatta*, or non-self, and he did so in the context of the traditional Hindu teachings of his time. The idea in Hinduism is that there is the false ego, and there is the *Atma*, the Self that is in all beings. This can be misunderstood, however, and we can imagine and grasp a self where no self exists.

The Buddha is reported to have said,

*"I have uncovered an ancient path",*

which to me means that didn't invent the level of realization he attained, and taught others to know for themselves. It also affirms for me something that I've felt all along, that there are Sages, wise and holy people in all traditions. The question is always whether the teachings are being understood, and practiced properly.

The teachings on ego and Atma are meant to bring a person beyond the ego and suffering, but they often aren't understood that way, and so the Buddha taught an-atma, no self, to correct the attachment to the illusory self, and to anything less than who and what we are.

If we want to know the valid criticisms of any one historical era's wisdom teachings, we can either look at the subsequent traditions that developed, or we can see these adjustments coming from practice within the tradition itself.

That these lineages have in many cases continued to the present day means that they have often incorporated the justified criticism into their approach. It's also possible that, to some people's minds at least, they leave something out.

2.

In the first centuries after the historical Buddha, the non-self teachings were further elaborated on in the Prajna Paramita, or Perfection of Wisdom Sutras. These are sometimes referred to as the Second Turning of the Wheel of Dharma. The most famous of Prajna Paramita teachings today are known as the Heart Sutra, and the Diamond Sutra, the world's oldest printed book. In these teachings, the key term is *shunyata*, or *emptiness*.

This refers not only to the absence in reality of the personal self we manufacture and cling to, but also to the ideas we have of places, events, and objects we take as unitary, separate, and permanent. Ideally, the experience of the emptiness of these lead us to a dynamic realization of this fluid world, guided by compassion. These teachings, however, can be misunderstood as nihilistic. A person may think that emptiness means that nothing exists. As Thich Nhat Hanh said, "empty of what?"

The same word can have very meanings. For example, the word 'burn' means something very different to a chef, and a personal trainer (as in, 'feel the burn', which is a good thing), and again to a photographer in the darkroom, where 'to burn' means to darken an area of a photograph.

The great saint of the 2nd and 3rd centuries, Nagarjuna, said that it is better to grasp a self where none exists than to misunderstand the teachings on emptiness, and then to deny cause and effect.

3.

*Things appear differently from the way they exist. It's like how a mosaic that appears one way when seen from a distance, and is understood differently when we look more closely.*

The Middle Way philosophy developed in the first centuries of the common era aims to counter misunderstanding by teaching emptiness as *dependent arising*. This means that things exist relatively, and so we have cause and effect, but we can be free from the grasping at a self that is the cause of samsara - endless wandering.

The Middle Way teachings also skillfully identify the root cause of samsara as *the gak-cha*, or *the refuting object*. It's clearly taught that the antidote to the very subtle mind that grasps the existence of a self is a very subtle mind that recognizes the emptiness, or actual non-existence of this. This is what we need to cultivate.

In the Middle Way teachings, the two ways we can misunderstand reality is to either reify, and grasp at a self where none exists, or to err in the other direction, and assert that nothing exists, which is the extreme of nihilism. We need the wisdom that sees accurately the way that things exist. Then we are free from samsara, and from a cold, mere detachment from the world.

In each approach mentioned so far, there are ways of possibly misunderstanding the teachings. When it comes to the Middle Way, the method of analysis and resting the mind with what is found can be rendered ineffective. If people don't have a good deal of quiet meditation, taming and concentrating their mind, there would be not enough strength of mind to *cut through the concrete concepts* we have. People study, and think, and debate, write books, and can speak eloquently about emptiness, but without realization based on combining calm abiding and special insight, such words are dry as bones. What's worse, their interpretations are prone to mistakes.

This should not just be a subject for scholars, which it often becomes. It's far too important for that.

Another potential mistake within the Middle Way approach is that it can stop at mere negation. There is a positive side to what is revealed through Wisdom practice, decreasing and removing the false ego.

As Arya Nagarjuna wrote, in *In Praise of the Dharmadhatu*:

*When a metal garment which has become stained with contaminations,  
and is to be cleansed by fire, is put in fire, its stains are burned but it is not,  
So, with regard to the mind of clear light which has the stains of desire and so forth-  
its stains are burned by the fire of wisdom, but its nature, clear light, is not.*

Our original nature is bright and clear, and filled with positive qualities, such as joy and ease. There we find kindness, gentleness, patience, generosity and compassion, existing in abundance, naturally.

Though we are practicing a path here that is aimed at removing illusion, we find there is more to us than we imagined.

In every case, we should check to see if teachings have the mistakes that are characteristic to them, or if our own understanding of them is complete.

By way of introduction to the Middle Way teachings

The historical Buddha used the insight into *anatta*, or selflessness to open the way to freedom from suffering.

The Perfection of Wisdom, or Prajna Paramita teachings followed this, emphasizing compassion, and *shunyata*, or emptiness, which refers to the non-self nature of all phenomena.

The potential problem with this approach however, both then and today, is that a person can go too far with negating, and fall into nihilism, or believing that nothing matters, when nothing could be further from the truth.

The Middle Way teachings arose as a decisive response to this problem. It negates only our misconceptions, or our misapprehensions, and nothing more. It affirms cause and effect, and ethical conduct, our connection to one another, and our place in this world.



## The First Order of Business in the Middle Way Teachings: Clearing Away Wrong Views

For practical purposes, it's helpful to know that there are two distinct teachings offered in what has come down to us as The Middle Way. One is negation-only, while the other negates and then affirms some aspect of truth.

These each have different functions, and it can be helpful to know this - to clearly identify what kind of teaching we are reading or listening to, and see if it matches what we need at any particular time in our life. There is a reason for each, as we will see.

Perhaps someone hearing the teachings on *anatta* receive all they need from this, and they are liberated from self grasping and realize freedom and great compassion. Other teachings have come down to us, based on those very liberating insights of the Buddha. Why was this so? Why not just keep the language of the original teachings? One reason could be that the realized sages that followed the Buddha, out of their wisdom and compassion found and developed other ways to guide their students. At their best, they explain the meaning of the teachings with greater accuracy and precision.

In terms of the history of Buddhist wisdom teachings then, *anatta*, or no-self in the Pali Canon was followed by *the Prajna Paramita*, including the Heart Sutra and Diamond Sutra. These were then followed by *the Middle Way, Great Perfection, Mahamudra* and the teachings on *Buddha Nature*. Each subsequent teaching explains more clearly what came before, chronologically, and so, for example, the learning about the Middle Way and practicing according to those instructions makes what is taught in the Heart Sutra easier to understand, and to practice.

This *Middle Way*, in its two aspects, looks back, to the earlier Prajna Paramita and *anatta* teachings, and then, even in one discourse when it

begins to use affirmative language, speaking of clear light, spaciousness, freedom, and joy, it looks forward, to the subsequent teachings, of Mahamudra, Dzogchen and those on Buddha Nature, and the Vajrayana View, the basis of Buddhist Tantra.

Where am I? You are here. Prasangika / Svatantrika, Madhyamaka / Maha Madhyamaka, Rangtong / Shentong Madhyamaka

It helps to know there are different views within Traditions, and that each approach will order the teachings in their own way, stating their view as the pinnacle, encompassing and surpassing all others. These are matters of debate, and for the philosophically minded.

Practically speaking, I find it more useful to consider all these teachings in terms of their function:

Jamgon Kontrul said that the teachings that just negate, such as the Prasangika approach, are the best for removing wrong view, while those that negate and then affirm, speak of our true nature.

The teachers and lineages who would speak of both aspects, for the sake of clarity, sometimes distinguish Madhyamaka, from Maha Madhyamaka, Middle Way from the Great Middle Way, or Rangtong (empty of self) and Shentong Madhyamaka ('empty of other' or, as Khenpo Palden Sherab Rinpoche expressed it, 'empty of the habitual negativities and obscurations that cloud the beauty of our inherent nature').

We do need both, it seems, and organically, in this sequence too.

If we were to try to affirm something about ourselves, without clearing away the residue and habit of our wrong views - what Lama Zopa said, as ordinary beings, we project onto everything, all the time, there will be conflict; the view will be obscured, or else we will reify those experiences, as we have so often in the past. To get beyond this tendency, and the even

the very subtle remainder of ego grasping, practicing the deconstruction through analysis of what we think of as self that is offered in the Middle Way is most effective. Then all that follows becomes clear.

At that point, the second aspect of the Middle Way teachings, affirming some aspect of truth can be taken up, with less danger of grasping, and making the same old samsaric mistakes of mind. These speak of non-duality, freedom, clear light, being unimpeded, and lead naturally to what's referred to as the Third Turning of the Wheel, on Buddha Nature.

Examples of Middle Way teaching

Lama Lodro Rinpoche taught the practice in this way:

*Look from the top of your head to the bottom of your feet for whatever you are called by name, for 'I', 'me'...*

*{Investigate... look thoroughly...then,}*

*You can see it's not there. It's a concept....*

*When you don't find it, stop looking. You found it (the point of this meditation) already... stay with that...*

*Look one time each session, then, when you come to the point that you realize there's nothing there, then stay there. Don't analyze further...*

Ringu Tulku expressed it like this:

*The main method here is to cut through all your concepts, to cut through all your projections, so therefore, there is no affirmation.*

*If there is any statement, 'This is it' - then, with logic, through reason, you say, 'No'.*

*In this approach, it's seen that, whatever you say is a concept. So in this way, you let go, you cut off, you dissolve all your concepts...*

And in the modern classic *Progressive Stages of Meditation on Emptiness*, Khenpo Tsultrim Gyatso says that, after analysis,

*'We will confine ourselves to refuting all views, but not asserting any counter argument establishing any views of our own. This amounts to a complete destruction of all conceptual views of the nature of reality...*

and,

*The aim of the Prasangika is to silence completely the conceptual mind, allowing the mind to rest in absolute freedom from concepts...*

This is the first delineated method of Middle Way insight practice. We use a precise and thoroughgoing analysis to bring the mind to the point of 'a non-affirming negation'. *This insight should be well established first, before moving on to other meditations.*

This first aspect of Middle Way practice leads to the cessation of grasping and believing in, and taking to be true all concepts about ourselves, and others, objects, places, and events. Then what is true is revealed. It is implicit. Going step by step, we can realize this.

## On The Middle Way and Buddha Nature

{Originally titled 'The self that is not and the life that is'}

When we talk about Buddhist Wisdom, we seldom hear of the life that is being validated. The method that most lineages teach us to get free from suffering is to *see through* the false self, the ego we project and take hold of as if it existed independent of our thought.

In the historical development of these teachings, *anatta*, no self, and *shunyata*, emptiness or the actual non existence of the imagined self were followed by the Middle Way teachings, that are about finding the balance of accounting for the mistakes not only of ego grasping, but also of nihilism, that is negating too much of our experience.

When we fall into nihilism we would to think, for example, that because there is no ego, then nothing exists, no karma, no interdependence, no relative truth as it appears to the minds and in the experience of living beings; that there is no inherent value in all of us, and no need for ethics and loving and compassionate engagement with one another. This is focussing too much on negation, and not on what is revealed if insight practice is done with a clear and distinct purpose.

The Middle Way doesn't minimize or replace what is taught in the annata and shunyata teachings, rather it indicates the fuller truth that is implied in them. What is revealed when we go beyond the false self is our relationship with one another, our connection to our spiritual and biological ancestors, and community; cause and effect, the need for ethics, and our fundamental virtue, our inner light, and our true loving nature.

From this point of view, we can say there is a self that is not, and a life that most certainly is. Going beyond the first leads us to the second, even if this not explicitly mentioned in First and Second Turnings of the Wheel (respectively, the teachings on the selflessness of persons, and all

phenomena we take hold of in our thoughts), there remains this truth that is spoken of in what is sometimes called the Third Turning of Wheel, on our Buddha Nature.

First, the self that is not - is seen and felt by most of us to be something separate, permanent, and unitary, or of a single nature. We have to see for ourselves how this is in our own experience... I'll wait....

Ok?

It's important to directly know how the false self appears to us, so it can be seen through with a bright, clear, and awake mind, repeatedly, and its effects can diminish and eventually disappear from our experience altogether. This takes time, surely, but it's this liberating wisdom that makes the difference between feeling separate from others and from our own depths and profound qualities, and embodying the knowledge of our truth here.

Then, the life that is, by contrast, is essentially connected to others, and to all of this life, to lineages, ancestry, and the natural world. It moves and manifests in profound ways, via art and teaching, illuminating worlds that were not seen before or enjoyed. We are beings of light, and light is our sustenance. This is what is revealed when we go beyond the false ego, and both the conceptual and emotional obscurations.

Thich Nhat Hanh, in his teaching on the Avatamsaka Sutra and Indra's Net, describes how a person living an awakened life is touched and nourished by the light of others who are awake. We take pleasure in the gift of our being here together, in this vast world, full of beauty and endless possibility.

Thinking of both the self that is not and what is revealed is safer than just saying the first one, and then possibly negating too much. And it's certainly safer than saying nothing, and continuing to suffer because we mistakenly

identify with the false self, the self that is not. *There is something seen through, and then, this life that is affirmed, that is sheer luminosity. There is celebration, creative work, divine resourcefulness, and fulfillment.*

## Awakening the Heart as An Aspect of Right View

(formerly 'Vertical Depth')

*Don't ask what love can make, or can do -  
look at the colors of the world!*

- Rumi

When we analyze self and phenomena, we can have the experience of breaking through our simple concepts about them. We begin to see causality, the relationships that presently support what we know, as well as prior causes. All this opens up our experience, and it feels as though it is describing an extension of what we know *on a horizontal plane*. It is correct to say *this* is supported by *that*, influenced by, and conditioning *this*, and so on, but there is so much more that needs to be accounted for if we are to have a full understanding of our lives here.

As true as they are, what is missing from descriptions of emptiness, mere interdependence, or impermanence, is what I think of now as the qualitative aspect of our lives here. *Included here is the experience of beauty, a sense of richness, joy and wonder, as well as all our human values, the wisdom of our feeling nature*. All of us have this, inherently, and it's easy to see. This is what responds to seeing a beautiful child with the spontaneous feeling of, Oh, how precious! Infinitely precious!

Without this aspect of our lives here being brought into wisdom study, no matter how refined the concepts are, what we are left with is an incomplete idea. After all, it may not matter that things are interdependent- by itself, that's no guarantee people will act ethically, or in any kind of responsible way.

Wisdom study and awakening then necessarily includes both our mind and our heart in relation to this whole ten direction world, and all our relations.



We find that we are not just related, but when there is an awakened heart, there is an ethical side to it as well. True, universal values are known, and affirmed, embraced and cultivated, and ethics, compassion, and responsiveness to social justice are all included in this, naturally.

Systems that first divide the conceptual from the qualitative obscurations then have to find a way to re-unite the two, and arrive at a complete view, one that is not abstract and cut off from positive engagement with the world. Wouldn't it be better from the beginning to train in both aspects?

## Wisdom As Knowing What is Important in Life

In the West, we commonly think of wisdom just as intellectual understanding, or the accumulation of knowledge, but there is much more to it than that.

*Wisdom, throughout time and across different cultures is the knowledge of what is truly important.*

I've been thinking about this lately in regards to my own country, the United States, in this, the early part of the twenty-first century. It's easy enough to identify the first two of what they call in Buddhism 'the three root poisons' in this culture - those of greed, and aggression, but the third one, and the root of *all* suffering, that of ignorance, is not as easy to see. It is unknowing, like a dull grey mass, and all our personal strife, barbarity, and social and environmental imbalance come from this.

Here, in this case, more specifically, ignorance is not only not knowing - we also believe things to be significant that are completely unimportant, while what is really precious here in our lives and in our world is overlooked, or greatly undervalued.

If we had wisdom, we would see the preciousness of all of life, and our place in this wondrous world, not as owners, but as stewards of all we have received, and care for, for this and coming generations.

Our ignorance is complicated here by this being the foremost consumer society, imitated worldwide, and all our commercialism and mis-education limits or distorts what we think of ourselves and one another. Advertising trivializes everything, and even if something is not important at all, it can be made to seem so, through the power of the media. This is really an enormous tragedy for us all.

We have been taught here that accumulating wealth and power, getting the approval and admiration of others, and enjoying sense pleasures is what this life is about. These things fall apart though, and if we depend of them, we fall far short of the happiness, peace, and satisfaction we all naturally wish for. This is a hard lesson to learn.

We have many thousands of homeless, and undernourished here, and yet we waste our money on trinkets; people here are indulgent, shallow, restless and dissatisfied. We spend a big part of our national budget on weapons, feeding insatiable corporate greed, while the poor here and all over the world struggle just to survive.

*Why is it that we do not know, do not care, and do not feel responsible for one another, and this precious earth?*

I would say it is a matter of people being caught in their ego. They are not liberated, and so the average person is acting from ignorance and the afflictive emotions. Once a person is freed from the shell of the ego, or wrong view, though, they become naturally compassionate, generous, and inclusive. It has always been this way, and it is this way now. We need more liberated people, in truth, many thousands, and tens of thousands, and millions more.

The absence of wisdom here may be hard to see at first, but once a person *does know* what is important, then ignorance can be seen in countless meaningless motivations and actions. I say this not to criticize or condemn, but simply because I believe we all have a responsibility to speak the truth. If others hear it, and take it to heart, in time it will be for the good of us all.

When I remember that the purpose of our human life is to care for one another as best we can, it greatly simplifies things for me. Whatever today's difficulty, or uncertainty, all is held in a greater vision.

*Right View* comes first in Buddhism, followed by Right Thought, Speech, Action, Livelihood, Effort, Mindfulness, and Meditation. If the view is wrong from the beginning, then everything that follows is also misguided, leading to dissatisfaction, our aims not fulfilled, or to suffering. When the most important things are clear, then conversely, every thought and action follows course, and helps create the beautiful world we know in our hearts is possible. This is universal.

One of the things I admire about Buddhism in particular is that it offers us methods we can use to see how things truly are. We're not asked to accept anything before we know it for ourselves, in fact we are clearly told to test out these propositions, and accept something only when we've verified it ourselves. Then we can share what we have known with others.

Beginning with a kind of wisdom that is insight into our nature, and the nature of others, and the preciousness of this life and this world, the way is open to fulfillment. Each day, and each activity can be known to have purpose, as part of our greater life in this place and time.

## On Not Reaching the Reality-Limit Too Soon - The Right Timing for Wisdom Practice

There are a number of themes that repeat throughout the Prajna Paramita in Eight Thousand Lines. There are teachings on the absence of self in dharmas, verses praising the Buddhas, bringing together wisdom and compassion, and the beauty of the Mahayana Path.

Among the more curious teachings on first glance are those that come across as a warning, and that distinguish liberation from a fuller realization of manifest virtues.

*The Positive Qualities of Mind are needed first to actualize the Bodhisattva Path*

These make all the difference when it comes to caring for, and benefitting others, which is central to the bodhisattva's way of life.

Here are couple of examples from the text, to illustrate:

*From Chapter Sixteen*

*Perfect Wisdom and Skill in Means:*

*Sariputra knew  
that the thoughts of those Bodhisattvas  
were freed from the outflows,  
without any further clinging,  
and he asked the Lord for the reason,  
or cause, of that.*

*The Lord: Those Bodhisattvas  
have honoured five hundred Buddhas,  
and during all that time*

*they have given gifts,  
 guarded their morality,  
 perfected their patience,  
 exerted their vigour,  
 and produced trance.  
 But they were not upheld  
 by perfect wisdom  
 and lacked in skill in means.*

*And so,  
 although they  
 had gained the path of emptiness,  
 had coursed in the Signless,  
 had put their minds to work on the Wishless,  
 as wanting skill in means  
 they had realized the reality limit,  
 and come forth on the level  
 of Disciple or Pratyekabuddha,  
 and not on the level of a Buddha.*

and,

*From Chapter XX - Discussion of Skill in Means*

*Without losing himself in this concentration,  
 he ties his thought to an objective support  
 [for his compassion]*

*and he determines  
 that he will take hold of perfect wisdom  
 [which is essentially skill in means],  
 and that he will not realize [emptiness,  
 because its realization is not the final goal]*

*...he has at his disposal  
very strong and powerful helpers,  
in perfect wisdom and skill in means.*

*Since he has not abandoned all beings,  
he is thus able to win full enlightenment,  
safely and securely.*

There are other verses throughout of this nature. They are significant because they highlight that the perfection of wisdom, as a bodhisattva practice, involves others, and the aim to benefit them in every needful way.

All the lovely positive qualities of the mind that we can cultivate, such as joy, patience, generosity, tender care, and gratitude, involve others - our parents, our teachers, and beings of the six realms. Were we to focus on the emptiness of self or others or dharmas *too soon*, these verses are saying, we may liberate our own mind, but the result will then be far less than it could be.

I personally have no doubt about the extraordinary qualities of the Arahants and sages of the Theravada, so this is a warning to all meditators, and not merely a sectarian stance.

*When we engage in Buddhist wisdom practice, the timing has to be right in order to get a full result.*

We have these minds that, in the state we call samsara, are obscured by wrong concepts and by the veils of the afflictive emotions - pride, greed, fear, sadness, anger and the like. All of our positive qualities, by contrast, brighten the mind, such that, when co-joined with wisdom practice, our true nature is revealed more and more: one naturally of great joy, resourcefulness, peace and well being, strength, gentleness and care.

Without enough of the heart qualities present at the time of meditation, the experience can be quiescent, or freed from suffering, it will also be lacking in the warmth, brightness, joy and kindness that characterizes a sensitive, awakened nature.

Along the way, we can see this dynamic again and again. When we are shut down, turned inward, less connected to others, or concerned with only our own comfort, then freeing the mind through insight has certain characteristics. There is release, and relief, and comfort and ease, and a person can naturally want to stay in such a state for a long time. This could be considered a sidetrack to a bodhisatta, someone who is dedicated to helping others as much as possible.

If we have the many of the noble heart qualities awake in us, by contrast, and then meditate on the wisdom teachings, the experience is very different. Engaging the world, remembering our ancestors, and our inherent potential, and that of all others, even simple meditation is transformed. Light, joy, and ease then arise naturally.

Freed from its archaic rendering, the sacred texts are constant guides to a bodhisattva's fruitful liberation, to his or her becoming a Buddha.



## A Door Opens - The Middle Way

In re-reading the essay in this section, titled 'One is not one', I was led again to the conclusion brought about by the study and practice of the Middle Way. This time, I could relate it to selected verses from Nagarjuna, and Je Tsong Khapa.

One is not one describes how, on investigation, the idea of a composite being made of distinct elements falls apart, as these elements are also composite, and yet we do have experiences, causality functions, and all ethical principles are affirmed.

The Perfection of Wisdom, and the Middle Way that is its continuation both give equal value to great love and compassion, and to realizing that all appearances to the conceptual mind are mere appearances, to be *seen though* with clear vision. Their aim is 'the complete removal of defiled actions from their root'.

A Verse by Arya Nagarjuna:

*If the rest of humanity and I wish to attain unsurpassed awakening  
{so needed for all of our sake}  
the basis for this is bodhicitta, as stable as the King of Mountains  
Compassion, which touches everything,  
and pristine wisdom, which does not rely on duality...*

I have heard the saying that

*The essential characteristic of the Middle Way is the absence of any conceptual assertion whatsoever,*

and this is something we need to understand rightly.

Philosophizing and thoughts about what is true are potentially endless, so it comes as a relief to hear there is an end to it. The timing has got to be right though. *This letting go happens at the point of insight.*

Not grasping at concepts is qualitatively different when done after analysis, or its equivalent. I wouldn't want to claim there is only one way to this insight, as many lineages produce outstanding, realized teachers. There is some quality of mind here that understands thoroughly, that is common to every liberating approach, and a result that is non-binding, opening the hand of thought, on account of this clear seeing.

Nagarjuna wrote:

*Everything that arises interdependently  
Is unceasing and unborn,  
Neither non-existent nor everlasting, (no being, no non-being)  
Neither coming nor going,  
Neither several in meaning nor with a single meaning,  
All concepts and duality are pacified.*

Here, we have ceased grasping, and are directly engaged with living, without the intermediary of concepts, or, unhindered by them.

### The Need for the Middle Way

Historically, the Prajna Paramita teachings followed those liberating wisdom teachings from the historical Buddha, which used the insight into *anatta*, or selflessness to open the way to freedom. The Perfection of Wisdom then emphasizes compassion, and *shunyata*, or emptiness, which refers to the non-self nature of all phenomena.

The potential problem with this approach, both then and today, is that a person can go too far with negating, and fall into nihilism, believing that nothing matters, when nothing could be further from the truth.

The Middle Way teachings arose as a decisive response to this problem. It negates only our misconceptions, or our misapprehensions, and nothing more.

*Whatever is dependently co-arisen  
That is explained to be emptiness.  
That, being a dependent designation,  
Is itself the middle way.*

This affirms ethical conduct, our connection to one another, and our place in this world.

For some, the earlier teachings are enough to free them from suffering and limitation, and is all they need. Others though need further guidance, especially when we consider the consequences of missing the essential point.

Nagarjuna famously said that, given a choice between misunderstanding emptiness and negating cause and effect, and continuing to grasp at a self, it is far better to continue ego grasping for a time. A person would then at least respect causality, lead an ethical life and have a chance to further cultivate their understanding. One who falls into nihilism, however, is truly lost.

*By a misperception of emptiness  
A person of little intelligence is destroyed.  
Like a snake incorrectly seized...*

How many these days violate ethical norms, in the name of some slight recognition, which is misunderstood and then misapplied? They have gone off the rails, and are so hard to reach. And the harm they do to themselves and others is considerable.

In the 14th century, Je Tsong Khapa affirmed what is taught in the Middle Way when he said:

*Clearly seeing the nature of appearances  
eliminates the extreme of what is called being*

*and correctly understanding the meaning of emptiness  
eliminates the extreme of what is called non-being*

*If you realize that,  
due to having this dependently-arisen-and-without-self nature,  
what we experience manifests through cause and effect,  
then you are no longer caught by extreme views.*

These teachings, formulated by our spiritual ancestors, speak the truth that has to be received in every generation.

*May it be this way for all of us  
May our understanding and freedom be complete*

## Measuring Progress in Wisdom Practice

*To the extent that afflictive emotions exist,  
ego grasping exists;  
and to the extent that ego grasping exists,  
emptiness has not been realized*

It's helpful from the beginning of the study and practice of Buddhist Wisdom Teachings to have a way to tell if they are having the intended effect, of first reducing and then freeing the mind completely from suffering. Without any standard in mind, we may engage these teachings on just an intellectual level, or not be relating them directly to our own experience and gaining their full benefit.

The standard I use comes from the Historical Buddha's teachings, and that of his accomplished followers. Even for someone hearing these teachings for the first time, it's useful to know their purpose.

*To the extent that afflictive emotions exist,  
ego grasping exists*

The clearest sign that delusion is present is that we suffer from the afflictions, of craving, anger, fear and sadness, pride and jealousy. This is only on the surface, but just as a plant or a tree always has a root, these difficult emotions are all based on wrong view, defined in Buddhism as ego grasping:

We take ourselves and others and our world to be independent, unitary, fixed in nature. This falls apart upon investigation, but the believed in wrong view persists, and can be recognized.

When we dream, we are convinced that what we are seeing is real. When we wake up, or even just begin to wake up, the emotion goes out of our responses to the dream.

It's also not just that self grasping is either there, or not, but there are degrees to it, which is why I begin this thought with '*to the extent that...*'

Ego grasping can be subtle. It can manifest lightly, or for a brief time, or it can exist in us *as a tendency*.

Lama Zopa taught on one phrase, *Remove dirt, and smell*, referring to *the tendency* of the mind that can be felt to form an idea of self or another, and in ignorance to take hold of it as who we are.

In the Buddhist teaching on how we either get caught or find freedom within, after basic ignorance comes karmic formation, which is represented as a person at a potter's wheel, an image I find very useful. We can identify what it feels like to shape an idea, and then to fixate upon it. This is what it's like to produce, and then mistakenly grasp what is only a concept of self, and take it to be who we are.

It's said:

*Things exist differently than the way they appear*

The guideline I use then goes a step further than identifying merely ego grasping as the cause of the afflictive emotions, in saying,

*to the extent that ego grasping exists,  
emptiness has not been realized*

This makes it clear to my mind that ego grasping itself is in turn *a result*, or *an effect*. It has a cause, which is *a-vidya*, or ignorance, not seeing. On account of this ignorance that does not perceive the way things exist, ego grasping arises.

The opposite of and the antidote to ego grasping has been variously described as: the direct knowledge and vision of things as they really are

(yatha-bhuta-ñana-dassana) as perceiving emptiness, or annata, that the self we conceive of and take hold of is not what is here in truth. This leads to letting go, we can say, in a sense, because we see there is nothing to attach *to*, in actuality.

Appearances, thoughts and ideas still arise, of course, and we can make use of them to serve our purposes, but there is this crucial difference: with wisdom we *see through* our concepts, transparently, and are not caught by them.

In a recent teaching on Mind Training, the Dalai Lama said that:

*Because of wrong view, self grasping, the destructive emotions such as anger and attachment arise; If you are able to reduce this clinging to an I, it will help reduce your anger, attachment, and so forth...*

We can say that *to the extent that emptiness is realized*, or the true nature of how we and all others, objects, places and events exist, then self grasping ignorance *lessens* and is removed, and the afflictive emotions also come to an end. This is the Third Noble Truth, the cessation of suffering.

Again this can go from a brief recognition, to one that lasts longer, and goes deeper, removing both the cause and the result of suffering.

From the outset this much at least should be known, so that we each can monitor our own progress, cultivating insight and freedom.

*To the extent that emptiness has been realized,  
naturally, ego grasping does not exist*

*and to the extent that ego grasping does not exist,  
the afflictive emotions are pacified, and removed*

*Like this, through Wisdom, one attains liberation.*

## II. Meditations on the Middle Way

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8. You can't step into the same river once

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12. Extending the Language of Buddhist Wisdom Teachings

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15. Prajna and the Conceptual Mind



16. Key Points of the Great Middle Way
17. The Utility of All Dharma Are Marked with Emptiness
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20. Buddhist Wisdom Teachings on the Theme of Conceit
21. Seeing the Conceits
22. Anything You Can Name - There's More To It Than That

## To Ordinary View, the Names of Objects

I will say this first as a preface to teachings on Conventional and Ultimate Truth. There is one line in a prayer to Tara that encapsulates conventional thinking. It says:

*To ordinary view, the names of objects are the same as their meaning...*

This means things like- a table is a table, a car is a car, a road is a road, Bob is Bob, some territory marked 'San Francisco' is San Francisco, and so on.

We are so accustomed to conventional view in our lives and in everything we think about and do that we seldom question it until out of necessity we come to Wisdom teachings.

The line that follows in the Tara prayer says:

*Like this, they produce afflictions and bind us to samsara...*

Until we begin to investigate the causes of our suffering, and the suffering in other people's lives, and in the world, we very much take our ordinary perception for granted, and then try within that framework to solve problems, and find a measure of peace, and happiness.

There is another way offered in Buddhism however, that goes beyond our usual, accepted ways of thinking and seeing the world. It begins with ethics, includes quiet and clear meditation, and reaches insight through investigation.

When we can see through our usual ways of thinking, about ourselves, and about one another, and this world we live in, our experience opens up. Depths and richness, our ancestry and interconnections are revealed, and naturally respect and harmony are born.

As long as we stay only within conventional thought, we're limited at every turn, and struggle to find resolution to suffering. Another way of seeing entirely is needed, and this is what is offered in Buddhism, and in other world spiritual traditions, at their best.

I would like to point out, as a preface to wisdom practice that make use of the language of the two truths - relative and ultimate, that I believe we do have this experience, of insight from time to time, but, not having the language or the framework to understand that experience, it slips away, and we find ourselves again constrained by common ways of thinking and reacting.

They say in the teachings on meditation in the Theravada that we should understand the steps in practice well enough to enter the meditation at will. We should have this same depth of understanding when it comes to freeing our mind through insight practice.

Any time we see through the names we give to things, we are entering into the fullness of experience. It could be that we look more closely at our selves, or at a thought, or at a place, or a process we have named, and we move through the names, or simple image we held. They have done their job, and we can put the map away and thoroughly enjoy in freedom the scenery in all its depth and richness.

When we then return to using names, our relationship to them changes, if ever so slightly. We know the name of a place, for example is the name, and has its use in telling others about it, but we also have in mind the experience we've had, and that remains available, and can be known by anyone for themselves, directly.

At its best, passing through the barrier of names and conventions frees us from the suffering of taking ourselves or another to be anything less than what we are.

It's said,

*If things really existed the way they appear,  
then not even the Buddhas of the three times could help us...*

The good news is that we all have this profound potential, that is indestructible, undiminished, and that manifests beautifully by creating the causes for it to do so. It's just that, but knowing this changes everything for a person, in terms of how we would then want to live our lives, in relation to all others in this whole wide world.

I would like to suggest this: see for yourself how conventional thought works, the ways it can limit a person, and how it can be transcended, in commonplace, and in extraordinary ways.

This key is in your hand. Use it wisely.

## From Diamond Sutra Metaphors

Anything at all that shows us clearly the way that the conceptual mind works has the potential to be liberating.

The nature of the conceptual mind is *always* one of fixation, also called reification, even if we change our thoughts rapidly.

Concepts also seem to divide what is in actuality indivisible. If we see through them, that is fine, and not a problem, but if not, and if we mistake concepts for what is here, in truth, then we create all kinds of difficulties for ourselves and for others and for the earth.

For examples of the fragmentary nature of concepts, we need only look at how we name different parts of the body, which are in fact not separate from each other, and then hold them in a way to be independent, unitary - being of one nature- simplified, or simplistic self-entities. We see ourselves also to be apart from our ancestors and all of our environment for the same reason - grasping too tightly at these concepts of ours as being what is actually here. Lama Yeshe refers to these as *solid, concrete concepts*, and it's for us to cut through all of these.

Anything solid that appears to the mind  
is a creation of your mind;

Anything limited that appears to the mind  
is a creation of your mind;

Any impediment is a creation of your mind;

Anything permanent, or impermanent,  
that appears to the mind  
is a creation of your mind,  
and is not what is what is actually here

Anything that appears as a single moment,  
apart from the three times,  
is a creation of your mind,  
and not what is actually here

This  
is a door, found everywhere, in every situation;  
and it is never lost; it is always available,  
and when entered, all doors are entered,  
all appearances are seen through, at once

But appearances and suffering persist,  
and so there is naturally this need for a path,  
for our own sake, and for the sake of others,  
engaging them in as many ways as needed,  
and for as long as necessary,  
until all are freed.

What a difference a word makes

There are some words that have not been translated for Buddhists in the West, or the ideas have been awkwardly communicated, such that it's almost like we have not yet received that idea.

I'm thinking here of the word *skanda*, which is usually translated as 'aggregate' or even 'a heap'. These are only a little better than leaving it untranslated, but not by much as far as expressing the meaning.

An aggregate itself is *a collection*, and being clear about this opens the teachings where the idea is used for the sake of developing liberating insight.

In both the Theravada Wisdom Teachings, and in the Perfection of Wisdom school, and Zen, we're taught to look into the collections, to really see into their nature, and specifically that there is no self to be found anywhere in them. It's taught that this is something we should verify for ourselves.

Keeping the word as *skanda*, or aggregate to some extent is to reify and to make into a unity what is a composite. As in:

Form

Feeling

Perception

Mental formations,  
and consciousness

- each of which are a collection, or a group of phenomena, or events, or experiences.

It makes a lot more sense then, experientially, to hear

*Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva,*

*When practicing deeply the Prajna Paramita  
perceived that all five collections  
of own being are empty  
and was freed from all suffering...*

When they say we should investigate, it is precisely here that what is presented to our mind by this one term can be either a barrier, or an open door to reality. As we work with the teachings, I'm sure we will all find more effective language. Then it's up to us to practice and realize the Buddhas intent, and tell others what we have found.

{See also the essay Like a Mosaic}



## Like a Mosaic

The three dharma doors are ways to liberation of the mind and heart. They are given as impermanence, no self, and nirvana. Each of these lead to a full result, seeing and experiencing the others. As my teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh said of impermanence, once we see their purpose we need to let go of these as doctrines as well.

When it comes to the no self teachings, there's something I've long been dissatisfied with, and amen hallelujah for that! It's led me onward, at least. Basically, the way I heard it from Thay and other teachers as well was that things are made of other things, that they are dependent arisings, and therefore the simple image we have of ourselves, and our family members and others as being independent is not accurate.

It's helped me to think of what I see as 'myself' or another *as a mosaic* - where individual tiles are put together to form what looks from a distance to be an object, such as a horse, or a person having a cup of tea. When we look more closely however, we see that there is no horse or person or teacup in the individual parts - that we have taken these elements all together and assigned our idea to them. (We have projected, and superimposed our idea onto them.) To see that we, or our father are made up of our ancestors, our environment and community, the collective, is good as far as it goes. It's when we look more closely that some discrepancy comes.

If things we imagine are of a single nature, are made up of other things, and these other things are themselves made of other elements, then stopping with identifying what we see as 'made of this or that' falls short.

It isn't completely logical to say that things lack self identity because they are made of other things, that themselves are also lacking this independent self nature. *It's as though we are looking at a mosaic where the individual tiles or components are themselves composite.*

In an earlier translation and commentary on the Heart Sutra, Thay said that the whole universe is in everything we experience. Perhaps this is too vague however for people to engage with to get beyond self grasping ignorance and states of suffering though. We need something we can work with, and so the second translation Thay made of the Heart Sutra emphasized emptiness as interdependence, or things not existing by themselves alone. The truth of what he had pointed out earlier still stands, however, that things are made of... everything else...

Where does that leave us, as far as practicing with the Buddhist Wisdom teachings? I honor that restless dissatisfaction in me that keeps asking questions until is it satisfied that we've gone as far as we can with the intellect.

How have others through time handled this matter? If things don't exist in the simple way they appear to our conceptual mind then how are we to think of them?, and how are we to engage them? This includes everything from our thoughts, to what we think of as ourselves, and others, and our ancestors, our community and world.

Going beyond the simple image from the first instance is in the nature of *vipassana*, or clear seeing. When we look more deeply, we can

*regard all phenomena as dream-like*

in the words of the Seven Point Mind Training teaching.

Another appearance, of what we are made of, or our ancestors comes to mind, and that in turn is also composite. We arrive at the sense that what we experience is unfathomable, and inconceivable. It is

*ungraspable and non-deceptive,*

in the words of the Diamond Sutra.

And, practically speaking, we need to have a *tolerance of inconceivability*, a phrase found in Robert Thurman's translation of the Vimalakirti Nirdeśa Sutra.

The Middle Way teachings arrive just here, viewing what we experience in a way that is

*\*free of assertions of inherent existence and non existence*

Things appear as fixed, independent, and of a single nature to our minds, {this is the nature of conceptual thought} but when we can view them as mere appearances, translucent, like a rainbow, or,

*like the reflection of the moon in water -*

our mind is unimpeded when we see them.

We can learn *to see through* these appearances, ourselves not separate from them, and view what appears to us, as Lama Zopa Rinpoche taught, with the recognition that

*this is my karmic perception*

When we are neither limited by our simple concepts, that we overlay onto experience and then take hold of as what is actually there, independent of our participation and thought;

And when we are not limited either by grasping at those elements that in turn make up a person, or place or experience as solid entities in themselves, then for our mind, the world opens up. Truly it does.

We enter into a world that is much like that described in the Avatamsaka Sutra, the Lotus and Vimalakirti Sutras, and in the Vajrayana - one of light, interpenetration, communion, compassionate responsiveness to the needs

of beings suffering in the six realms and bardo, which are all appearances to their minds.

We are no longer caught in any limited concepts about ourselves, or others, our heritage, our community, or our world. The entire field is open to us, to receive and engage with.

If we stop anywhere short of this vision and involvement with our lives here, we haven't taken the Buddha's Wisdom teachings as far as they can go, *and as far as they are intended to go.*

As with the teachings on impermanence, the no-self teachings are not something that should be held onto, but rather they are a door to go through to reach the full truth of our being here.

We've inherited such richness from our spiritual ancestors, and we can turn to them whenever we are unsure about anything in our study and practice. In many cases, they have left us detailed records of problems and mistakes that can arise when we engage these liberating teachings, and they all have the same purpose of helping us make our way through these.

Foremost among those ways of erring, for those who have an affinity with the wisdom aspect of spiritual teachings, are that they can become dry, academic - and cut off from life. What's more, they can be removed from the great compassionate motivation we should have when we consider the sufferings of beings in samsara. Joining great compassion and wisdom is the way for all mahayanists, those who attain a full result that benefits everyone, everywhere and always.

We enter the door that is closest to us. For me, going through the appearance of self, and then through the appearances of what comprised this experience leads to not grasping anything at all that appears to the mind. This is a practice.

*This world is boundless light,  
and we ourselves are that light,  
free, open, and naturally blissful.*

*May all who struggle and suffer find their way  
to liberation from suffering and its cause  
and may there be peace and well being everywhere*

## Nothing to be grasped

Not grasping anything is different from not grasping because one sees that there is nothing to be grasped. Resting in a non-conceptual state, we may still have the idea, underpinning that meditation, that there is something to adopt (such as awakening, or peace), or something to avoid (namely, thoughts, or ideas, or things). Then again, it could be a result of seeing or of knowing clearly that there is nothing *to* be grasped - that *anything that presents itself to the mind, as a person, or a place, or a thing, or an event, is just a concept, and not the actuality*. Believing in these things again, only to then put them down, or have any relationship to them would be like going back to sleep and again believing in our dreams.

In the calm abiding teachings, one of the faults is what they call 'over-application'. This is where one has applied an antidote to dullness or distraction, and the mind regains an even, clear state, but then we continue applying the method that got us there. It's a fault at that point because there is *no need* for it, and it directs our attention away from what should be the main experience then in the meditation, namely the experience itself of calm, ease-ful and stable lucidity.

In the same way, in the practice of Buddhist Wisdom teachings, it could be said that using more analysis than is needed would be over application. Once we see what is intended by indicating the meaning of emptiness - that things exist differently than the way they appear to the mistaken, grasping mind - then it's not necessary to continue probing. The experience opens, and the understanding we have acquired is present in the mind. Like learning some lesson as a child, or a youth, that then stays with us as the basis for all further learning, it's possible to learn the teachings on emptiness, fully comprehending their meaning and purpose, as a basis for all the subsequent wisdom practice we engage in.

## Painting

*Conceptual thought by itself is not the problem. It is misapprehending thought that brings unending problems. Fortunately, we can learn to recognize the nature of thoughts, and our own deeper nature...*

In Greek mythology, Pygmalion falls in love with one of his sculptures;

In Modern Literature, 'A painter falls in love with his own creation and disappears inside his own painting...'

And in ballet, in the Bolshoi's Coppélia, a dollmaker falls for his own creation...

This is a consistent theme in myth, literature and in art because it expresses a deep and universal psychological truth - that we can project a reality and then misconceive our own creations. They can seem to take on an independent existence. In Lama Zopa's language, *we are illusioned* by our own ignorance.

In Lama Yeshe's words:

*...we don't need to teach you magic - your mind is already magic; the magic of attachment has been within you from the time you were born until now...*

We fall under its spell all the time.

Buddhism is ultimately about freeing our mind from suffering through Right Understanding. In the Avatamsaka Sutra, what is to be understood is expressed this way - it says:

*The mind is like a painter  
spreading various colors.  
Delusion grasps different forms...*

*Yet not apart from mind  
there is no painting to be found*

And as the Twentieth Century teacher, Lama Yeshe said:

*Most of the time we paint. We put our own limited interpretation on everything.*

*(and yet) the object of your feeling has nothing whatsoever to do with the reality of any external phenomena. It is merely the painted projection of a falsely discriminating mind...*

Appearances

See how it is: The very nature of conceptual thought itself *is* fixation, called in Buddhism *reification*. It is static, while reality itself is dynamic, interdependent, and always changing.

We can *see* our mind's projecting a fixed nature onto ourselves or others, or onto our experiences. This is easier to do at first with labelling activities, such as, *I am walking, I am sitting, I am typing, or I am reading...* It's easy to see these as impermanent, and to get the feeling for what our thought superimposes onto experience. Then it's a small matter to notice our projections onto 'the transient collection' we call a person.

Projecting a thought and superimposing it onto experience is tangible, and something we can use and not be deceived by. We can learn to *see through* our thoughts to the underlying reality. They can become transparent, like 'rainbow painting'. They are there, but insubstantial. They serve a purpose, but we can learn not to be deceived or at all limited by them.

Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche expressed it this way:

*Mind creates both samsara and nirvana. Yet there is nothing much to it - it is just thoughts. Once we recognize that thoughts are empty (without the self nature or*



*independent nature we ascribe to them), the mind will no longer have the power to deceive us...*

The method to free the mind being deceived by appearances created by our own mind is to look at them closely, and to cut through the mind's clinging.

When we see our own projections for what they are, they dissolve. Clinging ceases.

Bokar Rinpoche:

*As long as we do not know the nature of the mind, we live with the conviction that thoughts really exist (as they appear). Taken as real, they become the cause of suffering...*

*On the other hand, the meditator recognizing the true nature of his or her mind does not mistake the reality of the object, and is not led to react...*

*This does not mean that one should attempt to erase the manifestation, to deny the creative faculty of the mind, rather one should see its character...*

Freedom of mind comes from investigation and then insight into its nature. Here's the profound truth the Buddha taught: We need not be deceived by our own thoughts, like the artist or the writer, or the sculptor, or the illusionist who is deceived by their own creation, or like a person who is half asleep and still dreaming.

We can be liberated. We can wake up to the nature of thought, and when we do, we have much more availability we can use to help others get free. Our own lived understanding makes this possible.

## Insubstantiality and the Illusory Body

*'If it can be grasped, it's not a rainbow' - Tilopa*

There are different ways we can relate to our own thoughts. The most common way is to take them to be independent of ourselves, and to react to them as if they were of a solid and fixed nature. This is what happens when we dream, or are half awake. We feel anger or desire, or fear, on account of misapprehending *our own thoughts*. It's like a sculptor falling for one of his creations, or a sketch artist who feels fear when seeing one of his own drawings.

Another way to relate to thoughts is to recognize them as our own creation, and as energy, insubstantial and changeable. This usually doesn't happen by itself without some training and so we can begin by intentionally producing a thought, of a tree, or an apple, for example, and then watching our responses.

We can notice that *the material* of our thought can seem to have different degrees of density, such that we can speak of heavy or solid thoughts, as though they were made of granite, as well as those that are lighter, more transparent and malleable.

We can think of our thoughts as being like rock or iron we mold, or of heavy earth, or of water, dense and heavy. We can also compose our thought with finer material, like a play of light... When we are able to do this consciously, then our thoughts have a different quality. It's hard then to mistake the thought of a tree made of translucent light for a solid object.

As far as training goes, seeing intentionally composed thoughts as utterly insubstantial would just be a first step. *The next challenge would be to recognize the thoughts that spontaneously arise in the mind in the same way.* This is by far the greater part of our mental activity, but if we are not to be

deceived by our own thoughts - taking them to be what they are not - this recognition is necessary.

When it comes to what we consider to be self and others, then a new element enters into the way we make use of thought. We can learn to see our thoughts about ourselves and others, objects, places, and events as sheer, luminous transparencies, and as illusory in a way. They indicate something in conventional terms, as a map or a sign with the name of a town on it does, but past this, we know there is more to what we are, and to what others are.

Proceeding like this can be called '*using thought to produce an illusory body*'. We refer to an I, interact with others, and appear as necessary to the minds of others, but without being fooled for a moment by appearances, and taking it to be all of what is here. It's necessary to function in roles, without being caught and limited by them. This is compared to a magician, or an illusionist, fully aware of his creations before an audience.

Tibetan Buddhism makes use of what they call the illusory body as part of their wisdom practice, and, as I remember it, this involves intentionally changing the appearances of thoughts, and understanding them well.

It's possible for an intuition of our deeper nature to be awakened in us. We can then be aware of our greater life beyond the surface of what is seen and talked about, all the while making use of common appearances to the mind. The difference now is that we remain awake, and *see through* these simple images. The light of our knowing continually shines through them.

You can't step into the same river once

Subtle impermanence, they say, refers to moment by moment change, but even that is not complete. In reality, things are not things, and so terms like permanent and impermanent do not apply. It's all change.

It would be so much better if we had a vocabulary that consisted entirely of verbs. That would at least be more accurate, and would not be deceptive, as our current use and misuse of language is.

Language rises out of people's minds, and, on a more subtle level, we 'read' each other's minds, for better or worse, and this is what we teach our children – in English at least. 'Johnny is happy', or 'Johnny is sad'. We ingrain ideas of self that way. It would be truer to put an 'ing' onto everything, implying nothing else, without a subject, as this is how it is.

There's the saying, 'You can't step into the same river twice'. Actually, we should say that you can't step into the same river once. That's a more true expression of how things are and can function.

*'Lacking even momentariness...'*

Things are not just permanent or impermanent, they are not even things. What we see and experience is lacking even momentariness.

We use the concept of impermanence to get unstuck from the idea we have superimposed onto life events, of permanence, but what then? The idea of impermanence also has something that needs to be seen and gotten past, and that is that there is some *thing*, (some kernel or nucleus that is somewhat fixed, a 'self') that is changing. This is called reification, or solidifying things, people or events in our thinking. It can be gross or subtle, but it is with us until it is consciously unlearned.

Wisdom, in Buddhist practice, always aims to see through the false appearances to our mind. We don't discard what is actually here, but we can learn to recognize our superimpositions onto the ever-changing reality. This changes everything for us.

As long as we *don't* do this, and, on the contrary, continue to grasp at and hold onto 'selves' where they are not, on investigation, seen to exist, then the basis for all the afflictive emotions - all the fear, sadness, greed and aggression- will always be there too.

Such is the nature of appearances for the average person – they seem to exist in a way they actually do not, but we can train our mind to experience in another, reality based way.

The great master, Kalu Rinpoche said that when someone gives us some problem, we should see them as transparent, and dedicate all our merit to them. This takes care of both the conceptual level – fixating on and solidifying a sense of self and others, and it also corrects the emotional, or qualitative level, where we have likely at least withheld our goodwill, if not actually wished another harm.

To consider that 'things are not impermanent either, because there are no *things*' – that is seeing through the labels we produce, the 'mere names' that we give, and not getting caught in them. Many people get stuck here. If 'things' are impermanent, then they are born, they die, they increase, they decrease, and so on. All that is based on mistaken thinking. It doesn't match the reality that Buddhism teaches us we can see and know for ourselves.

This is what we need to directly perceive, without the intermediary of ideas about 'it is this way', or 'that way', and without borrowing conclusions arrived at by others, and substituting it for our own personal experience.

Where things begin and end, we can't say. We can't encompass that with our concepts. What we are now is also beyond what words can describe, but it is something we can experience.

Not caught, there is space and light; there is peace, profound connection, and, ultimately, there is love.

May we live with this understanding.

## The Middle Way View #2

{Since no understanding of the mind would be complete without understanding the nature of conceptual thought, I offer this for reflection.}

*'...if there is grasping, you do not have the View*

Any time there is a reference point that is grasped and held onto, and believed in as real, there is delusion. When we believe that our thoughts about ourselves and others and the world we live in are what is actually here, we miss the mark. We are mistaken. We are seeing and holding onto our thoughts *about* reality, and are not knowing the fullness that is here.

This is understandable up to a point. We use our concepts, much as we do our physical senses, to orient ourselves, to navigate our world and to try to make sense of our experiences. We categorize - near and far, useful and not useful, dangerous, helpful, and so on. The problem is that we then relate to our fixed notions instead of the greater truth of what is here. When we don't hold our concepts lightly, we miss our interdependence, change, and the deeper nature.

How else can we orient ourselves?

When we first begin to see through ego-grasping, it can be disorienting. We may quickly try to re-assert some reference point to hold onto. This is not the only option we have, however. We can also begin to see with the eyes of the spirit, where we are not separate from one another, or our own depths.

This is referred to at times as non referential compassion, seeing in a way that is not separate, dynamic and resourceful, and naturally responsive to every need.

The Diamond Sutra says that we should

*give rise to a pure and clear intention with our mind not anywhere*

and in a way, this is holding our concepts correctly, with wisdom, not being bound by them.

Concepts can be useful, as far as they go. They only become a problem when we take hold of them, and mistake them for what they represent. Thoughts still arise naturally, and there is nothing intrinsically wrong with them.

As Tilopa said,

*You are not bound by your thoughts,  
but by your clinging to them  
so abandon clinging, Naropa!*

which is also translated as:

*It is not appearances that bind you,  
it is grasping.  
Cut through your attachment, Naropa.*

or,

*You are not bound by appearances,  
but by your attachment to them  
Cut through attachment, Naropa!*

Seen rightly, concepts are *transparent*, and able to change when needed; they are not obstructive, they offer no impediment to the mind.



## The Middle Way View #1

*{Note: for a week after writing the following essay out longhand, I couldn't not find it. I kept thinking along these lines though, and eventually I wrote down another version. Then I found the first attempt to give form to these ideas. Here is the first version}*

As long as there is a reference point that is grasped, and clung to, and believed in as absolute, there is delusion. This much is verifiable, upon investigation, but we continue to take what is merely provisional to be what is actually here. Part of this is habit, but it also happens on account of not seeing thoroughly how the ego's point of view is mistaken, and the cause of so much suffering for ourselves and others. We don't know any other way to hold our concepts, and to make our way in the world.

The Diamond Sutra says that we should

*give rise to a pure and clear intention  
without our mind dwelling anywhere*

How is this done?, you may wonder. Surely this is a most worthwhile study.

When we are in love, or are involved in a collaborative creative work such as playing music, we can't really say - we are here - and not over there as well; or that we are one, or two, or however many we may like to count.

There is a wholeness functioning, a dynamic that can't be caught and represented accurately by conceptual thought. We have to let go, and know it directly.

We can still be ourselves to the full, and also have an intuition of the invisible aspect, these unfathomable mysteries.

When we are a part of our surroundings, or in communion, it is part of us, and we are part of it; there is a harmony, a dance-like movement, at once sensitive to every need, naturally resourceful and creative.

The Diamond Sutra also has this passage,

*How does one create a serene and beautiful Buddhafield?*

*By not creating a serene and beautiful Buddhafield.*

*That is what I call creating a serene and beautiful Buddhafield...*

This is about creating a sacred place, or a Pure Land. In this case, there is no ego involved, no *I am doing this for these people, or for my self*. When the ego is absent, there is great peace, and spontaneous, effortless creative activity just happens naturally, *like reaching for one's pillow in the middle of the night*, as they say in Zen.

The Tao Te Ching has this passage that refers to the same egoless activity, that is not separate from others:

*A leader is best when people barely know that he exists...when his work is done, his aims fulfilled, they will all say, "We did this ourselves."*

This is something we can learn to trust, through insight, and watching carefully how our lives here actually *are* together.

Concerning ideas of self and others, we then need what Bob Thurman called *a tolerance of inconceivability*.

What our ego idea and our senses present to us is not all there is to us, or others, or to our surroundings. Ideas can be useful, as far as they go, but our life here together far surpasses any ideas we may have about it.

When teachings speak of non-referential compassion, there is an immediacy that is referred to, a newness, and resourcefulness, and timeliness.

We can also by extension speak of a non referential joy, abounding, a shared life of the spirit.

Whenever we find ourselves clinging to reference point as defining absolutely what is here, such as- *she looks like this, or he said that, or this happened between him and me*, and so on, we have a precious opportunity in that moment to see through the held onto conceptual thought, and free ourselves again. Then we know this deeper life again that is shared with all others, kindness and compassion and wisdom fulfilling its purpose.

## Expressing the Inexpressible

{formerly 'The Middle That is Not Even the Middle'}

*The true nature of reality cannot be described by any conceptual fabrication, by any conventional term or expression. Thus, it is not existent, not nonexistent, not something, not nothing, not permanent, not extinct; it is not the lack of these things, and it is not even the middle in between them, for that is a conceptually fabricated extreme as well.*

- Khenpo Tsultrim Gyatso

*If you are caught up in the idea of a dharma, you are also caught up in the ideas of a self, a person, a living being, and life span.*

*If you are caught up in the idea that there is no dharma, you are still caught up in the ideas of a self, a person, a living being, and a life span. That is why we should not get caught up in dharmas or in the idea that dharmas do not exist.*

*Bhikshus, you should know that all of the teachings I give to you are a raft.' All teachings must be abandoned, not to mention non-teachings.*

- The Diamond Sutra

We use reason, and cultivated discernment to know directly the way things are, prior to our labelling, or unobstructed by our projected thought and language, should there be any. What we are left with following inquiry is something quite different than our means of entry into this view. Whereas before, we were looking guided at first by thoughts such as,

*it is not one, it is not many,*

or,

*it depends on other causes and conditions*

to know clearly how what we conceive of is not what is actually here.

We arrive at a place at last where thoughts are known to be merely names we give to an ineffable reality that in every way exceeds the grasp of the conceptual mind.

Whereas we usually use a term such as 'middle' to refer to a point between two known facts, here it is the release of those reference points that would establish even a center, or a middle. Interestingly enough, to say it is *not even the middle* more accurately describes where we find ourselves, in terms of experience when we use Middle Way methods.

We see, as Nagarjuna taught, that

*Everything that arises interdependently  
Is unceasing and unborn,  
Neither non-existent nor everlasting, (no being, no non-being)  
Neither coming nor going,  
Neither several in meaning nor with a single meaning,  
All concepts and duality are pacified.*

We have long left behind both the negation of phenomena, that error, and the fixation as well. Our experience when these are seen through and thereby released is at once mysterious, profound, unencumbered, unburdened, and having nothing more to assert, or superimpose.

We are so used to having everything organized in our thought and communication with even provisional reference points, that when these one by one and then en toto stop being depended on in an ultimate sense, having proven to be without foundation, without validity, then all of the concepts we may generate to describe ourselves and others and our world also simply... stops.

*The aim of the Prasangika is to silence completely the conceptual mind, allowing the mind to rest in absolute freedom from concepts...*

- Khenpo Tsultrim Gyatso

It's like we have used two sticks to start a fire and the fire of insight-wisdom then consumes these means themselves...

If we are still believing in and convinced of any reference point at all, there is still conceptual activity, something false there that is still being clung to.

We can see, as the Diamond Sutra says, that

*When something is being distinguished by signs, in that place there is deception...*

It is, but at a certain point there is nothing more we can say about its actual nature. It speaks for itself fully, and clearly, without leaving anything out.

In The Vimalakirti Nirdesa Sutra, one dialogue presents the challenge of speaking of the ultimate. One by one views are offered, until, finally Vimalakirti is asked to address this challenge, and he does so by remaining silent. This is known as 'The Lion's Roar of Vimalakirti'.

We can and do engage with experience, by nature effortlessly, and ceaselessly, but we are not separate from it, not creating and then believing in false distinctions and discriminations.

The Diamond Sutra says that we should

*give rise to a pure and clear intention thus,  
without our mind dwelling anywhere...*

This being without grasping as a result of discernment, newly realized, takes getting used to, and the only way that happens is with a deepening familiarity. This is the path to freedom through insight, and when it is being actualized, it is freedom itself, and its activity.

From The Avatamsaka Sutra

*To all internal and external worlds  
Bodhisattvas have no attachment at all,  
Yet do not abandon works beneficial to sentient beings;  
The great ones cultivate this kind of knowledge.*

*In all lands in the ten directions  
They do not depend or dwell on anything;  
They do not grasp things, such as livelihood,  
And do not arbitrarily create distinctions.*

*They engage with all sentient beings  
In all worlds in the ten directions;  
Observing their essential nature,  
They practice dedication reaching everywhere.*

May all beings have happiness, and all the causes of happiness flourishing.  
May all beings enjoy an abundance of positive conditions,  
well being, and peace.

## Extending the Language of Buddhist Wisdom Teachings

If we understand the meaning of what is taught in Buddhism, we should be able to express what we've heard in common language. What's more, we should be able to expand on points that may not have been elaborated on. When we do this, we can use our own language, or if it suits our purpose, we can reach back to how things were expressed before. This should all have a practical purpose, especially when it comes to the Wisdom Teachings. Whether we are just expressing what we've heard before, aiming for the utmost fidelity in communicating those ideas, or whether we go further in expanding on some point, the purpose should be the same: *to illuminate an idea so that our practice can be a more effective means of liberation.* Generation after generation, we can see this being done, and it will surely go on this way in the future.

When I pick up a phrase from a particular time in the history of Buddhist Wisdom Teachings, I try to understand it's context, what came before and after. I also try to understand why the teaching was given, what errors it was responding to, as well as the possible limitations that could come from it, if not held correctly.

The phrase I'm thinking of today is one that the Dalai Lama's Lineage, the Gelupga, references in their teachings. They refer there to emptiness as a *non-affirming negation*. This goes back to Nagarjuna's Middle Way teachings, from the 3rd century A.D. It's purpose, then and now, is to direct a meditator's attention to only the aspect of negation, when the false self we habitually grasp in ourselves, each other, in objects and experiences, upon investigation, is seen to be not there as we conceived of it at all. When we focus on that truth, it lessens and uproots that very self grasping tendency, that is the source of suffering. This is not all there is to Wisdom in the Buddhist sense, but in this approach to liberating the mind, that aspect of experience is focussed on exclusively.



The Middle Way teachings historically were given as an explanation and refinement of the Prajna Paramita, or Perfection of Wisdom Sutras. The Heart Sutra is the most well known of these, and in it we find the lines:

*In emptiness, there is no form, feeling, perception, mental formation, consciousness;*

*There is no eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind; no color, sound, smell, taste, touch, object of mind; no realm of eyes until no realm of eye-consciousness;*

*There is no ignorance and also no extinction of it until no old age and death and also no extinction of it;*

*There is no suffering, origination, stopping, path, cognition, also no attainment*

In each case here, we are focussing on the emptiness, or the complete non-existence of a separate, reified self or experience. The larger Prajna Paramita Sutras, such as the Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000, 25,000, and 100,000 Lines, it may come as a surprise to find, don't add anything more to this one essential point. Instead, they are meant to direct the mind continually to this truth, in many of its applications.

As with all of the Buddhist Wisdom Teachings, this is responding to the need to uproot the cause of suffering in ourselves and in the world. That other expressions of the Buddha's wisdom came forth and were expressed, written down and transmitted and taught, all came from this same motivation.

If it would have been enough to only repeat the historical Buddha's words, then out of wisdom and compassion, that is what would have been done. But ways of misunderstanding the teachings of course appeared, and so the manner of expression or the emphasis also naturally changed.

The implied compliment to what was called 'a non-affirming negation' is *an affirming negation*. This is when, by removing the false self, our *innate qualities are revealed*. We know our bright and shining Buddha Nature, our interconnectedness, and our natural joy and ease. The emphasis here is still on negation - in the phrase 'an affirming *negation*' - the negation, emptiness, non-self, is still the subject, but at the same time, another aspect is acknowledged.

To go a step further now, based on this language, I can see two more possibilities. (bear with me here a moment - as this is more than mere sophistry) One would be *a non-negating affirmation*, and the other, *a negating affirmation*. I'll try to explain what I mean.

*A negating affirmation*, in an everyday sense, would be like when a person has been well paid. If they then think and feel '*I have a few hundred dollars in my pocket*', they are negating the thought and feeling '*I am poor*', or '*I am broke*', or '*I don't have any money*'.

Another example could be when a person stands up and can see above a hedge to the field below, *they are enjoying a positive experience*. Implied is *the exact opposite* of the thought and feeling of '*I can't see what is below in the valley*'.

In terms of Wisdom practice, experiencing the Nature of Mind can be, *and should be a negating affirmation*, seeing and feeling and experiencing that the self we had grasped as ourselves and others, this world and experience, in truth, is not what is here *at all*. This is the dividing line that determines whether the experience of non-conceptual wisdom, the clear light Nature of Mind, is able to cut the root of samsara.

*The essentially positive experience here has a negation to it as well, that cancels out the false thought or belief we previously held.*

We see that things exist differently than the way they appeared. Of course, this is only reflected on with language after the fact, but as we meditate we can use our discriminating awareness and see for ourselves in the moment whether or not this is so.

I recognize that I and students have to be careful at this point, because it's one thing to have this insight arise on its own in the course of non-conceptual wisdom practice, and another thing altogether to have it be a mere thought construct that is remembered, and that we are trying to accommodate ourselves to.

On the other hand, an equal mistake would be to believe the experience of non-dual, non-conceptual awareness alone is sufficient, without the realization of its import. This would be a form of *a non-negating affirmation*, which is the same as self grasping. Such an experience alone doesn't touch the ego grasping tendency in us, the root of samsara.

If we like, we can familiarize ourselves with the sense of a negating affirmation in practicing a number of the Buddha's teachings. For example, if we are practicing to counter the Five Hindrances, resting at ease in the brilliantly clear and unimpeded Nature of Mind, we can recognize the way in which it inherently counters (*or negates*)

attachment

anger

restlessness - distraction

sloth and torpor, and the veiled mind

and doubt

To mention another example, we can practice with this experience of the Nature of mind as a positive counter to what are called the Three Poisons:

Its natural, effortless generosity counters greed;

As unconditional love, compassion, joy and equal minded inclusiveness, it counters aggression;

and as Awareness, inner vision, insight wisdom itself that sees through illusion, it lessens and removes the imprint of ignorance.

Here too, despondency is replaced by joy, and doubt and fear by confidence and courage.

*There is an enormous moral reserve in each of us,*

said Martha Roldos.

Insight such as this, however we arrive at it, and whatever language we use to describe it, is an affirmation of truth that negates the mistaken idea of ourselves as lacking. It is the experience of this insight that helps us to let go of the old, the false, until all that is left is this truth of our being here together, in all of its wonder, depth and beauty. Then we can work most effectively in this world, helping others in relative and ultimately beneficial ways.

Shantideva said that *'All of the Buddha's teachings are for the sake of wisdom'*.

I write these words as a student of as many of the Buddha's Wisdom teachings as I can find and try to put into practice. We should all use whatever teachings and commentaries help us most to get free of suffering and its causes. Then we should share what we have found

to be the most effective means. This is what has kept the teachings viable in the past; it is how we continue the tradition of practice and realization in our present day, and it is also the way we can support future generations, doing our part in helping them to accomplish the teachings.

*Em Ah Ho!*

*How wondrous!*

## To Bring Out the Quality of Discriminating Awareness

Back in the early 1990's I had the most excellent good fortune to receive teachings from the great scholar and accomplished teacher Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche. I remember that people were meeting with him privately with him at that time, to discuss their practice, and that during the break one day I met and spoke to one fellow student. This woman related to me how Kirti Tsenshab had recommended that she study the Middle-Way Buddhist wisdom teachings. The sense that I had of it at the time was that her mind was soft, diffuse, and 'wooly', and that he was recommending this to her to sharpen her critical faculties. Then whatever practice she would do would go deeper.

Studying the wisdom teachings that make use of analysis and reasoning, I learned, not only brings insights and understandings by our using that faculty, it also sharpens the mind. It brings out the quality of discriminating awareness that then continues in other areas of study and practice.

## The Nature of Discernment

*Discriminating wisdom and discursive thought are not the same...*

Discriminating, critical intelligence is usually associated with discursive conceptual thought, but when it comes to meditative practice, they are different. Following certain lines of thought and investigation *can* indeed bring out this sharp quality of mind that sees deeply into phenomena, but thought by itself is not discerning intelligence, otherwise, the more we thought, the more this quality would always come through, and this is not the case. In fact, sometimes too much thinking can fatigue and dull the mind. So what is the quality we would cultivate?, and how is this done?

The nature of discernment is an incisive acuity of perception. It is the manifest power of the mind to see precisely into what is looked into.

This quality of mind is what distinguishes someone who directly realizes a teaching, and gains the benefit of it, from someone who is only a scholar or an intellectual. In studying the Dharma, it is this awakened intelligence that is brought out and applied, as evaluation and investigation into self and phenomena. This results in insight - *vipassana* - seeing clearly and freeing the mind through these methods, as compared with merely knowing about them, so this difference is vitally important.

Discernment is developed by settled, quiet meditation, done patiently and attentively over a period of time, when the mind gradually becomes bright and clear on deeper levels; it is cultivated by using rational thought, and following expositions and reasoning; and it is developed by fully understanding and consciously cultivating the different ways we have of knowing, with the intellect, and with the heart. This goes in the direction of full knowledge, whereas rational intelligence alone would be partial.

Whenever there is liberating wisdom, discernment is functioning. Both the methods that make use of discursive thought, and the non-conceptual

methods arrive at this same point. These are surely truths we should see for ourselves.



## Prajna and the Conceptual Mind

If you are reading this, you are making use of the conceptual mind. We try to make sense of things, study various subjects, analyze, compare, and discuss using this type of activity, but the best this rational, discursive mind can do when it comes to *prajna*, or liberating wisdom, is bring us to the point where we reach the end of concepts and analysis.

Another kind of knowing needs to be used if we are to get anywhere with 'the wisdom gone beyond'. Gone beyond what?, you may ask- beyond ego and the afflictive emotions, and beyond the usual framework of thought.

This mind of ours can produce a concept of just about anything, but that alone is not enough to free us from suffering and its cause, which is the whole point in Buddhism. It's not just the amelioration of distress and dissatisfaction, although it can certainly be that too along the way, and it's not just a clear understanding of how the mind works to create either bondage and limitation, or freedom, though it is surely that as well.

Prajna is freeing because it sees in a new way, with our whole consciousness. It is not an object taken up like so many other subjects, just using our mind in the same way. Instead it is when the subject and object are not different. When we lose the self or the ego as a reference point, our whole life opens up.

It's not enough to try to understand Prajna Paramita with the intellect alone. That is like trying to understand the totality of light with an instrument that, by its nature, refracts the light. The only way to understand something like this fully is to be one with it- to know it directly, and not as something apart from ourselves.

Of course we can try to talk about it later if we wish, but then the basis is different. We can see how knowledge quickly becomes second, third, fourth and fifth hand, discussed, argued about, theorized about- removed from

direct experience. Once we've had this experience though we can return to the universal source of all valid points of view.

## Key Points of the Great Middle Way

Over the last half of 2011 I've been listening to, reading, and reflecting on [Lama Zopa Rinpoche's teachings on the Middle Way](#), as contained in his Light On the Path series, (available online) and other of his books and recorded talks. Here are a few notes I've made on the distinctive features of Middle Way teachings.

The Middle Way is called that because it seeks to avoid the two extremes of eternalism and nihilism. Eternalism fabricates and then grasps onto or reifies the idea of a self, an object, or an action. Nihilism, on the other hand, errs by asserting that nothing exists, and therefore there is no reason to avoid negative actions and to practice what is right and good. Right practice avoids these two extremes.

### *With us all the time – the habit of ego grasping*

Our grasping at the idea of self, that is the cause of suffering, is with us all the time. It doesn't have to be produced by an act of volition. Rather, it is *a deeply ingrained ignorance*, the result of unawareness, and having misapprehended things in the past. This will continue to be with us until we are realized, or accomplished in meditation.

We can say that the *imprint* left on our mental continuum lies dormant, is activated by contact, and is reinforced by deluded, egocentric action. This tragically binds us further to the continuation of samsaric suffering. It has been this way again and again for living beings, not only in this life, but throughout countless lifetimes.

Unless it is seen through, this habitual, reflexive ego grasping that is with us all the time, is being reinforced continually in the mind. For the ordinary person, without knowing it, these limitations are always being projected and repeatedly strengthened everywhere, throughout all aspects of experience.

*For truth to be known comprehensively, and freedom attained, the very characteristic of mistaken consciousness needs to be seen*

To uproot the ignorance that is the cause of suffering, it is not enough to just rest in a peaceful state, or in space-like equipoise, or in the clarity of the mind, useful, or even necessary as these meditations may be at times. Rather, the exact characteristic of this mistaken, self grasping consciousness has to be fully recognized and seen through.

Following the Buddhist teaching of realizing the Four Noble Truths, what is called in Tibetan 'gak-cha' or 'the refuting object' needs to be precisely seen: its **cause** is conditioned ignorance and the reinforcement of that; and its **consequence** is suffering. Then the discriminating **wisdom practice** that brings the dissolution of mistaken consciousnesses needs to be engaged in; and the **result** achieved – which is freedom at once from our whole range of self-created problems.

*The result of analysis needs to be unified with deep, powerful, and wakeful calm abiding meditation, free of faults, over a sustained period of time*

Ignorance exists in us, until removed, in gross, subtle, and very subtle forms. To remove the cause of suffering in its most subtle form, we need to generate a very subtle and thorough going, awake wisdom consciousness. Anything less than this would be just dealing with problems relatively on the surface, leaving the root cause of all our samsaric sufferings intact, to manifest again and again and again. Only when this wisdom that thoroughly understands the nature of experience is then applied on the

subtle innermost level, over a sustained period of time, long enough to transform the mind, can we ultimately cure all the sufferings of samsara.

*Developing Wisdom has a 'global' effect*

When thinking of 'an object' or of 'a self', or of an action, ordinary beings conceive of, project, and superimpose limited ideas onto things.

Recognizing the emptiness, or the ultimate non-existence of this, that it doesn't exist *at all* in what is there, in other words, seeing that this idea is a mere label, and how things are *in actuality*, has a global effect.

I borrow this term from how it is used in computer programs: there is a way to replace one term, hit a key, and have that term replaced throughout an entire document.

In a similar way, recognizing the non-existence, for instance, of a table, or a chariot, or an action, such as 'making soup' – recognizing that these terms are just concepts superimposed onto a collection of parts or actions – has the effect of seeing that same principle everywhere, and seeing through all of our projections everywhere at once. Each of the Middle Way reflections, if engaged in and entered into meditatively, can be universally freeing in this way. That is their purpose.

Cutting through the cause of suffering, even temporarily, removes all the afflictive emotions at once. To the extent that we have removed the cause of suffering through wisdom realization, to that extent we are free, healthy, and capable.

*Going beyond ego grasping reveals things as they are, and enables us to live full and meaningful lives here in this world*

Ego-grasping keeps us from seeing what is actually here. Since beginningless time, we have accumulated the habit of wrong views and the obscuring effects of all the afflictive emotions. Cutting through ego grasping is radically different from this, and it reveals things as they truly are.

When brought together with the full complement of meditative practices of calm abiding and loving kindness, the practice of wisdom reveals at once our innate freedom, and our own and others' inherent richness. It reveals the preciousness of life; the insubstantial as insubstantial, the impermanent as impermanent, non-duality, and our interdependence with all of life. We become fully capable beings, naturally living responsible, caring lives, lives of both wisdom and compassion.

In *The Three Levels of Spiritual Perception*, Deshung Rinpoche quotes Shantideva as follows:

*If no beings exist [in ultimate reality], toward whom should we have compassion?*

*To attain the result [of buddhahood, which is to be achieved only through the awakening of great compassion], one should direct one's compassion toward whatever it is that unenlightened beings call 'beings'.*

Deshung Rinpoche then adds:

*On the conventional level of reality, beings do not exist as they are perceived by other unenlightened beings. The bodhisattva realizes that, in ultimate reality, there are no beings who exist as unenlightened beings think, but he directs his mind toward those beings as they perceive themselves. On the ultimate level, he sees no beings, but he realizes that on the conventional level, beings think they exist and do experience suffering. Out of objectless compassion, therefore, he directs his mind toward them.*

## The Utility of All Dharmas Are Marked With Emptiness

It's taught that we should meditate on emptiness continually, but since we are not usually practicing sitting and walking meditation, how can we keep this realization in mind?

The Buddha taught *anatta* - the recognition that nothing should be grasped as 'I' or 'mine', and this is affirmed in the first phrase in the Heart Sutra:

*Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva  
when practicing deeply the Prajna Paramita  
perceived that all five skandas of own being are empty  
and was saved from all suffering...*

and in the second:

*O Shariputra, form does not differ from emptiness  
Emptiness does not differ from form  
That which is form is emptiness,  
That which is emptiness, form  
The same is true of feelings, perceptions,  
mental formations, and consciousness...*

The teaching then shifts and offers a key to how we can carry this realization forward into all we do. Saying,

*O Shariputra,  
all dharmas are marked with emptiness...*

This is a particularly Mahayana invention. From what I can tell, this is not referred to directly in any of the Pali Suttas, although it is implied.

The meaning is - all that we see and engage with through our senses, and in our mind - the road we walk on, the car we take to go to work, the places

we visit, all that we conceive of, is equally without the fixed, independent self nature we habitually project onto them, and then hold onto.

Of course, seeing the emptiness of a vase, or a car, or 'the beach' may be only slightly interesting, if it's just another thought, but we can use it for a deeper purpose.

*The aim of all Buddhist Wisdom teaching is to free our mind from self grasping ignorance and the afflictive emotions. Their purpose is liberation.*

Every line and word of the Heart Sutra has this aim, and if we can take up this practice, cultivating liberating insight, the Buddha's intention will be fulfilled.

To see that *all dharmas* are without any self nature can enhance our insight practice. If we're on the lookout for them, we'll find countless opportunities to continue the practice that begins, and then is nurtured and sustained in sessions, and on retreat throughout our lives.

We can identify the projection of an idea. Lama Zopa recommends going shopping with this sharp awareness - of the fruit at the market, or the pots and pans, and looking at our concepts superimposed onto the items, or experience.

I recall clearly seeing this once when making soup. I got myself tired at the thought of all the steps ahead, and so I thought to myself, *I'm not making soup, I'm just cutting carrots...* then, *I'm not making soup, I'm just getting out the pot and putting some water in it...* and so on... Before I knew it, I had made soup. This idea I had a few minutes earlier was somewhat oppressive, and a bit funny, actually, once seen.

Car, street, store, beach, children, brothers and sisters, teachers, the clerk we see at the register - all these are seen differently by different people, and so our own perspective is just that, and nothing absolute, or final, as our fixed



concepts assert. Even the suffering of the six realms has more to it than is immediately evident. I read recently a line from A Song on the Experience of the Middle Way View -

*If things are as they seem to be,  
not even the Buddhas of the three times could save us...*

This is pointing to the truth that things are workable. Because they have arisen from causes, when those causes and conditions change, the result will also change. They have this potential. I find this very hopeful, especially when thinking about events in the news, and my practice.

Of course, all the relative, consensus agreements still apply, and karma functions throughout, but the view that attaches to ideas and opinions, can be transcended, and this is what the Buddha and accomplished teachers would have us directly know for ourselves.

All we see then takes on an illusion-like character that is not fixed; we see our interdependence, shimmering, intangible, and yet vividly present, and responded to naturally.

## No Terminus

An image came to mind to me recently, when reflecting on the Buddhist Wisdom tradition. These teachings include pointing out the emptiness, or actual non-existence of the self we imagine and superimpose onto our experience, as well as revealing the greater life that is revealed when we see through our projections.

The image is one of piece of silver metal, in the shape of a piece of an antenna - a few inches long, and straight, and solid through and through. On each side there is a distinct end, like the tip of one of these antennae - round or square, and well defined.

Here's how it represents what I'm thinking:

When we conceptualize ourselves or another, we are creating a clearly demarcated beginning and end, even though with some consideration we can see that the actual nature of ourselves, and other people in truth goes well beyond this - simple, thought up point of beginning and ending.

For example, when we think of a person with such a self grasping mind, we leave out of our thinking any sense or vital knowledge of heritage, ancestry, country and culture. All that past, and all the contributing factors in this moment are left out of our completely oversimplified ideas.

Seeing our projections as clearly as possible vividly exposes their inaccuracy to us and helps us to see through them. They are not what is actually here, but we believe in our thoughts, and are caught by them, and reactive.

In truth, there is no terminus to what we are experiencing, either before or after this moment, the 'birth and death' we think of and believe uncritically believe in.

Our lives extend well beyond what we think of when we take up a self, person, living being, or lifespan as the object of our grasping, and this is where it gets even more interesting.

We are connected in every moment to our ancestors, to our teachers, to the traditions we have a deep affinity with, to our natural world, and the divine that is our support and nourishment. This is the life we are living now, what we draw from, the life of our life.

To return to the image of the metal bar, to try to represent something more true to our mind with it: before the piece of metal was solid, and all of one simple nature. We can bring to mind what we meet when we think of ourselves or another as a hollow bar, without terminus, and with life-energy moving through. This is too simple, but it goes in the direction of meeting the fullness of ourselves and each other without being limited by our thinking. There is openness, movement, wonder and delight, and a more workable sense of the dynamics of change. There is interdependence and greater sensitivity to the moment. Everything we do matters well beyond what is acknowledged by our gross senses.

This is not far from where we are now. It is the nature of our experience.

## Transcending Conceptual Fixation

When we grasp a self, it appears to our mind as *fixed, independent, and of a unitary nature*. Seeing through any one of these characteristics, we arrive at what is actually here. Meditating on any one of these can be a door to liberation.

In the Pali Tradition, impermanence is reflected on, and investigated to overcome our habitual tendency to grasp things - persons, and objects and ourselves as fixed for all time. These two cannot both be true- and when we recognize that what we have been holding onto is a mistaken idea, that self-clinging fades, and vanishes, along with the difficult emotions it produced.

In what are known as *the Second Turning of the Wheel*, and the teachings on the *emptiness*, or *the non-existence of the separate self* we project, one of the main meditations to arrive at insight is that of interdependence.

We conceive of a self, an others, of objects, places, and events, and ascribe to them properties they don't inherently possess. We then take these appearances to our own mind as existing absolutely on their own, completely apart from all our labelling, categorizing, and interpretations. Whether at night when we are dreaming, or going about in the daytime, without awareness, habitually, the untrained person engages objects of mind in this way.

In the Middle Way, one investigation goes as follows:

*The topic is a sprout -  
it is not inherently existent  
because it is a dependent arising.*

When we investigate what we are made of, we find no independent self or object, or territory, such as that represented on a map. We learn *to see through* our concepts, and to be not caught by them. This is greatly freeing,

and, when applied deeply to how we view ourselves and others, we find the freedom from suffering taught by the Buddha and our teachers. These are the most common methods used to find lasting peace and well being in Buddhist meditation, and there are others as well that can be employed.

To overcome the misperception of oneself or another as *unitary*, the appearance of that quality should be made clear to our mind:

When we say something has a *singular nature*, this means it appears to be one thing - solidly, through and through - such as a tree, or a person, or a dollar bill, a place, a car, or a watch.... There is something that we overlay onto our experience, and that is our concept of it, that makes it appear as one nature, or one kind of substance throughout, like butter, or gold...

When we look for this unitary, solid, fixed, eternal, unchanging self nature, we don't find it anywhere on or within the experience itself. Moving from the concept or the idea of investigation to actually looking and seeing for ourselves, our own experience can open up, just like this.

Self grasping is mostly unconscious. It is sometimes quite gross and evident, but usually it is subtle, reflexive, habitual, and pervasive, as Lama Zopa teaches. We don't recognize it or the limitations and problems it causes until we take this up as a study - either Buddhist or otherwise.

The advantages of connecting with a Tradition, of course, is that we then have the resources of insight and the legacies of accomplished teachers to guide and inspire us. The truth is always here for us to see, and, given how important this study, of liberating insight is, it's to our advantage to use every means available to find freedom from wrong view and suffering, and to share it widely.

Thich Nhat Hanh said,

*Looked at from the point of view of time, we say, impermanent;  
looked at from the point of view of space, we say, non-self.*

This self we conceive of can be investigated. I recently heard a variation that said, this idea 'can be interrogated'. I liked that because there is something focussed, and vigorous about it.

*The self that appears - is it apart from the body? or one with it?...*

*If it is completely one with the body, when the body loses one part, does that sense of self change? or does the idea of it remain the same?...*

We can ask ourselves, when seeing a person, or ourselves, or an object of mind

*It is only that? or is there more to it than that?*

We can see how what appears to our mind as unitary, or singular is our projection.

Any of these reflections and investigations, into impermanence, interdependence, or the composite nature of what we experience can show us that *things exist differently from the way they appear.*

Seeing this, and then exploring it further, intensively, has the power first to lessen self grasping ignorance, and then to completely uproot samsaric suffering and its cause.

II.

Now, transcending conceptual fixation does not mean that if someone asks us directions, we don't know what to tell them -

*Aah, I've transcended all labels - why don't you?*

- that would be ridiculous.

It means that we are not caught by signs, as it says in the Diamond Sutra, which is to say, we do not take our idea to be what is actually there.

We can say,

*Go left on Lake Street, and right on Billings Road,*

and, at the same time, we can *see through* these words, concepts, and ideas.

In the language of semantics, we don't take the map to be the territory. These terms are a part of our shared, consensus reality, and we can simply use them provisionally, for practical purposes, without being caught by them.

It's the same with agreements about the meaning and relative value of currency. While we can see these pieces of paper and metal have no intrinsic value by themselves, we can respect our consensus agreements about them.

More than just philosophy, this kind of understanding can have far reaching applications.

On a personal level, we get caught when we identify with one part or ourself, or one memory, or experience, as if it defines us. Secular teachers encourage us to see beyond this, for example, Bryan Stevenson, the lawyer and human rights advocate said that

*Any person is more than the worst thing they have ever done.*

This is very much like Thich Nhat Hanh saying

*You are more than one emotion*

On a political level, fixating on one person or political party or class as the cause of all our strife keeps us from making other connections, and finding deeper, more comprehensive solutions. We can see ourselves and the person or group for what they are showing us, and at the same time we can *see through* our concepts, so that all these are held in a greater context.

Here, there is abundant resourcefulness, new perspectives and possibilities.



## Buddhist Wisdom Teachings on the Theme of Conceit

The word 'conceit' has a range of practical definitions in Buddhism. It covers everything from the common emotion we are familiar with, all the way to our subtle self concept. The way it's defined points the way to greater freedom.

Conceit is recognized, first, in the way we usually think of it, as pride and looking down on others, holding an inflated sense of self importance. It is in the additional meanings of conceit, however, that we find the wisdom aspect: conceit is also explained as *the idea we hold of ourselves implicitly* as better than, worse than, or equal to others.

As in the other presentations of wisdom teachings, it's said that we don't so much create our self-idea with a moment to moment act of volition, but that we carry it with us, habitually. We then react to circumstances out of that thought up sense of self.

It's interesting that we have this secondary meaning of conceit in the English language as well, as an underlying idea that is accepted, or taken for granted.

There are many ways to get to the same point, of looking at the idea of ourself that we hold, and this teaching on conceit is one of them. It points out how we can find the sense of self we have constructed and that we maintain. Whenever we think or feel, I am better, I am worse than, or I am equal to, the underlying assumption is of a self. That self, when we examine it, seems to be of a single nature, separate from others, and permanent. There is clearly more to us than any of our ego-ideas can encompass, and this is exactly where insight can transform our experience.

The traditional teaching that nothing should be grasped at as I or mine, "He looks, this is not me, this is not mine..." was not meant to be used

merely as an affirmation. To just repeat words would be almost useless. What is essential instead is to see for ourselves just how far our ordinary ideas are from who and what we actually are, in our fullness. Then the emotions accompanying pride, or self denigration lessen and vanish from our experience.

When we think of a conceited person, we can see the fragile ego that can't stand even the slightest criticism. It's not really a pleasant state, though a person can get stuck there for a long time. It seems to go with reaching a pinnacle of success. Some few become accomplished and stay humble, but even humility has a shadow, if we are not careful. That too is an insecure state. We are still grasping at an ego-idea as who we are, and the not-self teachings warn us that as long as we identify with *any concept* we are caught. We will miss the boundless wonder of our being here, and all our relatedness in this very moment.

As with other wisdom teachings, the ideas on the subject of conceit are offered as encouragement to see for ourselves how things actually are, as compared to how we imagine them to be. Our conceits are a subtle phenomena, and so we need meditation, time, energy and enthusiasm to see into them and get that much more freedom as a result.

Sometimes, when we suddenly become aware that we are holding physical tension, we automatically let go and feel relief. In the same way, when we are aware of how we are holding some idea of ourselves that doesn't match the reality we find in contemplation, in that instant the idea can dissolve and we can experience the relief of greater inner freedom. In the Great Perfection teachings they say, "In the moment of seeing, there is liberation." We know right then and there that we are more than any idea we can ever have.

When mistaken concepts are more deeply imprinted, of course, it takes clear seeing, and more time and energy to transform them, and their emotional effects, but even our most subtle and persistent fabricated

concepts can be seen through, or understood as such, and our experience can open up.

All the different wisdom teachings in Buddhism have this one purpose of leading people out of suffering. We suffer because of the limiting ideas we impose on ourselves and others and this world. The teachings on the different meanings of conceit, and particularly as it being the underlying assumptions of self we reflexively hold, point the way to greater freedom

I recall one teaching that says,

*Jealous of superiors,  
arrogant towards inferiors,  
competitive with equals –  
for an ego-centric person,  
there is never any contentment*

The fabric of our lives here is woven from our regard for one another. For this reason we have abundant opportunities in our daily lives to find the feeling of conceit. More importantly, we can see through the ego idea that underlies such evaluation. The basis for all this comparing and judging can then dissolve, and while the relative truths remain, to be seen by relative minds, the depth and fullness of our lives here can also be known. This removes pride and aggression, self denigration and undervaluing others as well. We can begin to value one another rightly, and to live from that understanding.

The teachings are a welcoming door, and it remains only for us to reflect on them, awaken to what they are saying, and step into freedom.

## Seeing the Conceits

A couple of years ago, I wrote about what are called the conceits of ego in Buddhism. Part of what drew me to this particular teaching was the way that it leads inward, as compared to the way we use our attention in much of our lives. As I pointed out in that article, the way the term is being used in this tradition is an uncommon, secondary sense of the term. It refers to the underlying assumption we may have about something or someone. The beginning of a science fiction novel, or movie, for example, lays out the basis for the story to be told.

There's another way in Buddhism that the conceits can be taken up and observed, as a liberating practice, that I heard again being talked about recently by Ajahn Pasanno. He was asked about what are called 'the nine conceits', as places where the self-view, or ego 'hides out'. They are:

Thinking one is superior when one is superior,  
 thinking one is superior when one is equal,  
 thinking one is superior when one is inferior;

Thinking one is equal when one is superior,  
 thinking one is equal when one is equal,  
 thinking one is equal when one is inferior;

and,

Thinking one is inferior when one is superior,  
 thinking one is inferior when one is equal, and,  
 thinking one is inferior when one is inferior.

These are more obvious than the conceits that are an underlying assumption, though they may be that as well. Our thoughts range from coarse to subtle, to very subtle. The comparisons we use to make our way through life are something neutral, in and of themselves, but these conceits

are more accurately described as being negative emotions. As it's said, we feel jealous of those who we feel are better than us, competitive with those we consider equals, and arrogant towards those we think we are better than.

Comparison and competition are pervasive in the 21st century West. It appears in everything from self image to relationships to sports, the arts, education and income and the things we possess. The entire advertising industry aims to get us into comparing ourselves with others and concluding that what we have and what we are is not enough, and that we would be better off, and better than others if we only had their product.

These 9 conceits, when taken up as a practice would have us look at the forming of the concepts of less than, equal to, and better than, with the aim of freeing us from both negative emotions and the idea of a self that we produce and then take hold of as ourselves. Its beauty as a teaching is that it is accessible to anyone willing to look at our responses to experience.

I would add one more to these conceits, and that is the notion of ourselves as being unique. In every case, we are fabricating a self in relation to others, separating ourselves through an identification that is not necessary, and that does not stand up to investigation.

If we slow down and watch, we can see that it is not a single, consistent self we think of and identify with, but that it changes with conditions. With this person, we feel less than, with that one we are equal in some way, and with that one we feel ourselves to be better. This fabrication of a self happens reflexively, around the matrix of an I, or an identity that is just at the surface. We project a self onto changing conditions and take that to be who we are. Seeing through this, it's not difficult to sense how we are more than our thoughts, and our comparisons, and that others also are more than they could ever think themselves to be, however hi or low, equal or unique they may believe in any way. We can let go of these conceits, that are just concepts, and know the fullness of our inner nature.

## Anything You Can Name - There's More To It Than That

Most of us live in a world created by the thoughts we have, without realizing it. For that reason, the wisdom teachings from the first tell us to turn around and look at our own experience, and the making of it.

Take this pencil I'm holding - as with most concepts, the idea of it is as something removed from its history, its manufacturer, and all that went into bringing it into my hand;

or take an emotion, such as fear, or irritation - looked at apart from its causes, it just seems to be there, independent, in a fixed way, until it is replaced by another, seemingly solid, unitary block of experience.

None of this would be too bad, after all, except that we suffer on account of our thoughts, when they are not true to what is actually here. They don't represent accurately the fluidity or the fullness of our lives. This is the cause of untold problems for ourselves, between people, and in our world.

When Thich Nhat Hanh said, 'You are more than your one emotion', he was aiming to help someone get unstuck from their identification with just one experience, which can be like a reflex, tightly grasping. It is not volitional, but it can be relaxed, and more can be known of what this life is by easing up on the grip we have on our ideas, 'opening the hand of thought', as Uchiyama Roshi put it. This lets in more light, and air.

Most of our mental activity is reflexive, habitual, and ongoing. From morning 'till night, and into our dreams, for years on end, we dwell in a world that, if not entirely of our own creation, then is very much circumscribed and conditioned by our thoughts. These can be learned on our own, or inherited from our family, and culture.

When we have a chance to see the levels of mind in meditation, beneath language and images, we start to have some insight, and control over what

we experience. We can understand for ourselves the evolution of either misery or freedom.

When they say that 'all dharmas are marked with emptiness', the Prajna Paramita Suttas have taken the Historical Buddha's teaching on annata - his liberating insight, and extended it to *all* that we encounter and can think of: ourself, and others, our surroundings, an experience, objects, and events. It is pointing out that, in every case, there is more to it than our simple thinking allows.

To say that

we are multifaceted,

or,

that we have a profound nature;

that we are a continuum,

and changing moment by moment -

this is a mirror to see our mind, and how it misconceives what is here. We think of things, self, others, objects, in fact, as the opposite of these - as simple, fixed, independent.

Of course, this doesn't mean that what we experience and hold in mind with concepts has no validity, but that our experience is open to interpretation. We may change our point of view, our way of thinking, and when we do the nature of what we experience can reveal itself in a new light.

What then can we do with a teaching such as the one that says that 'all is present in a simple experience', such as having a cup of tea, or beholding

our beloved child? Does it have any practical value at all? Just thinking about this, while not really satisfying by itself, is *an invitation* to enter into the depth of this living experience more fully, in a way that is awake, reverent, and responsive. Then all of the interdependent conditions of ourselves, and all our history, and all our boundless potentials can meet another who is also a miracle, profound, and boundless.

We become quiet, attentive to the work that is before us now, of freedom and fulfillment for ourselves and all others; grateful, and committed to healing, and to the highest possibility of living for us all.

This evening, I will let my mind and heart dwell just here.



### III. The Two Truths

1. A Note on what follows
2. The Range of Consensus Reality
3. Looking at What is Valued As a Stepping Stone to Wisdom
4. Preliminary Questions for the Teachings on the Two Truths
5. On the Importance of Relying on Wisdom
6. From Notes on the Two Truths
7. On Being Unmistaken
8. If You Want to Know the Way Out, Seek Wisdom, and Not Emotion
9. The Inseparability of the Two Truths

## The Two Truths - Preface

The two selections that begin this section were originally something I had set aside as 'additional essays'. My reason for placing them up front like this is just to highlight how commonplace what are called the Two Truths actually are. When we can see this in the course of our daily lives, we're in a better position to realize these teachings, than if we were just studying and practicing them in a retreat environment. We can begin to see how wisdom can apply throughout our lives.

Most of what follows is of an introductory nature, and so I won't repeat what I traced out there. To link it back to what has come so far in this collection, I will say only that these teachings on the Two Truths represent the culmination of the Middle Way view and practice, in their expression, and application.

*May we all realize these teachings fully,  
put an end to suffering and its causes,  
and lead each and every being without exception  
to that very same state!*

## Looking at What is Valued As a Stepping Stone to Wisdom

It's easy to see that people value all kinds of things. There's a wide range to what they think of as supremely important. I'm thinking of sports fanatics, to begin with, as the most visible example. Some people think that whether their soccer team wins or loses is actually, objectively important.

I've found it's a good practice, if you're invested in a team or sport, or the outcome of a mere game, to watch another sport, other than the one you like. It exposes the absence of any objective value, besides what we've given to it. And while it shows just how ridiculous it all is, something significant can also be found here.

To the mind of a sports fanatic, *of course* it's important if this player is signed, or succeeds, or is injured and unable to perform. *Of course* it's important that the team wins- this much is accepted, but the feeling has been created by that person's mind.

*So often, things appear to have objective value, independent of the person, but we can see from this example that this isn't so.*

A step further would reveal other assumptions or conventions, such as those of national borders, or the value on any given day of a piece of paper we call money.

These things change, but it's very easy to assume their permanence, independent of our thought. We collectively hold onto ideas, as shared agreements, and it feels as though they are the natural order of things. We forget that they are man made conventions, and can be changed, or disregarded as needed. They don't represent anything true in and of themselves.

We inherit ideas, of culture, or family, and we also carry forward ideas of ourselves and our world. If we don't look closely, it can appear as if these

thoughts we have exist by themselves, without our input or tacit acceptance, and *this* is where they form the sense of the world we inhabit. Without these thoughts that seems to divide nature, people, and places, just what is here? Can we learn to see through our conventions?

Beyond these seeming limitations, there is a depth that can be known; there is connection. This is why wisdom is always praised as the key to resolving difficulties, and as the way to peace.

## The Range of Consensus Reality

It's worth looking closely at our collective agreements, since they only serve a limited purpose. They can also cause problems if we are not careful with them.

Here are a few such agreements:

time;

the names of places, such as nations, states, and cities;

boundaries, including lines on a map, and public and private property lines;

currency;

societal roles;

and,

the names we give to objects, and people.

The truth is, these conventions are usually not a problem. It's *when we grasp them as absolute, as existing by themselves*, rather than by agreement that conflict follows.

For example, one group or more may feel that a territory is theirs by Divine Right, feeling that 'It's always been this way!', or that it is theirs by some manifest destiny, and not up for debate.

Consensus thought is so much a part of our world that it can be difficult at first to distinguish what is man-made, and what is actually here by itself.

Currencies, gold, and jewels *only have the importance we give to them*. Praise and renown also are as ephemeral as clouds, but these are commonly held to be meaningful in and of themselves. A man or a woman looking this way or that, being this age, or this or that race has this much unquestioned value.

None of this matters much, but the truth has *to be sifted* from the common view. What is actually here needs *to be recognized*, then these conventions can become a door to liberation. Understanding consensus reality can lead beyond what is commonly thought and accepted.

There is no particular reason we call this person 'Bob', or that object 'a chair', or think of some things as easy or difficult, but once we do, it seems we then take these names and ideas as existing by themselves. It feels as though they exist 'out there', independent of our customs and arbitrary agreements.

If we can hold these conventions, and provisional ideas lightly though, it gives us the option to see them, and to make use of them without being caught. This allows for greater flexibility and resourcefulness in our thinking, as well as more tolerance and humor. Our depths and interdependence can be intuited throughout it all.

## Preliminary Questions for the Teachings on the Two Truths

I suspect that the teachings on what are called *the Two Truths* are similar to many other profound, far reaching ideas in Buddhism, in that while they may be of great value to people, they have become quite abstract, embedded as they have been in academic traditions, and seemingly removed from our lives. Like other wisdom teachings though, nothing could be further from the truth - I suspect that they describe *exactly* the nature of our lives here, and can be of wondrous benefit, but that they also need to be unpacked, understood, and spoken anew.

I start with these personal questions then, as they are the vibrant threads that draw me forward.

The Two Truths, generally speaking, are *relative truth*, and *ultimate truth*, which is simple enough to say, as a door. Relative truth also goes by the names *consensus reality*, *provisional truth*, and *the way things appear to ordinary consciousness*.

Lama Zopa refers to conventional truth as '*deceptive truth*' and '*truth to the all obscuring mind*'.

Ultimate truth, by contrast, is *the way things actually are*, and is the known by someone who has *wisdom*, *superior seeing*, or *true discernment*.

To take it a bit further: In Buddhism, the liberating Eightfold Path begins with Right View, and that is followed by Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Samadhi, or Concentration. If the first step is off, or if there is anything at all lacking about our view, then everything that follows will likewise be mistaken, to some extent at least. We're not Buddhas to begin with, so, what to do? I think we're encouraged to keep this outline of the Eightfold Path in mind, and then to continually examine our view, to adjust and improve it, in line with what we find in our study and contemplations.

I come to this part of the body of teachings then to understand as well as I can - *What is the nature of Right View?* This is the most important question we can be asking in our lives, because how we answer it determines all that we do and share with others.

I recall again now how common and tragic delusion are in this world. Everything from a paranoid person I knew, to the illusions that arise and deceive in my own mind, and in the minds of my family members, to the mass delusions of racism, aggression, and class bias, and the desecration of our precious mother earth.

In the Tibetan Tradition, they have an area of study called *Pramana* - or *Valid Cognition*, which right away raises question of

*What is the mind that clearly sees the way things are?*

We live with and accept a certain amount of illusion, liminally - in relationships for example, where one person will wake up one day and find that the person they were seeing, or had married, was not the person they thought they were. They have become *dis-illusioned*.

Advertising and patriotic or political fervor also *illusion* us; we're influenced by others; we believe things that are not true about ourselves, and one another, and our world; we are all too familiar with the vocabulary of imaginal worlds;

and as bad as that is, we also don't believe in or trust what is verifiable, the profound, and the sacred in our lives.

So my questions leading into this study are

*What is the complete nature of Right View?*

Or, in the context and language of these teachings,



*What is the nature of valid cognition?*

Valid cognition, of course, implies a valid cogniz-er, and so,

*What kind of mind sees things as they are?,*

and,

*Just how do we cultivate that awareness?*

Then,

*How can we engage wrong views in others in our world?*

and,

*How are these mistaken ways of perceiving understood in this body of our inherited wisdom? -*

This applies to everything from mass delusions, ego fixations, projections, dreams and fantasies, to hallucinations, like those brought on by drugs, exaggeration and denigration. All those are distortions, and, as I understand it, are remedied by cultivating the mind and heart that knows rightly.

This is helpful, from *The Two Truths*, by Guy Newland:

*The term “concealer-truth” indicates that conventional phenomena are truths only for the perspective of an ignorant consciousness that conceals reality. In fact, conventional phenomena are not truths, but are falsities because they do not exist as they appear.*

*Nonetheless, concealer-truths are found by conventional valid cognition while ultimate truths are objects found by ultimate valid cognition. Conventional valid cognition is not superseded or invalidated by ultimate valid cognition.*

*Concealer-truths cannot be divided into real and unreal because they are all unreal and false. However, they can be divided into those that are real in relation to a worldly perspective and those that are unreal in relation to a worldly perspective.*

Most people familiar with Buddhist wisdom teachings already know about wrong view, as ego grasping, that is taught as the cause of suffering. It is the common way people relate to themselves and to others, continually and pervasively superimposing fixed concepts, as one teacher put it, 'like a latticework of thoughts and ideas'.

Ultimately, it's taught that the two truths are to be understood as one. This teaching then is a method to comprehensively clarify the nature of our lives here.

## On the Importance of Relying on Wisdom

From a letter to a friend, in March, of 2021

One thought came to mind to tell you about, when you asked, '*How do we respond when other parties may not have activated the innate part of them which knows ultimate truth perspective?*' -

I may have told you in a previous message how my interest in the teachings on what are called *the Two Truths* was driven by the desire to understand that very question. I was thinking of someone I cared for who was paranoid, and imagining things, but was very difficult to convince of the need to see things differently, or to listen to those who knew her and cared about her.

Sounds familiar right? It is to the point of it being universal, I do believe.

In any case, I did have this *aha* moment this week, looking, and looking, and not finding, but best of all, recognizing that I had not yet found what I was looking for in terms of something that felt like a deeper understanding of what is needed.

Then, I was reading about the Two Truths, and one commentary mentioned *the four reliances* - and right away I remembered what those were about, and felt something break open (you know the feeling).

I've been having this sense that I couldn't answer the question we are both asking, about how to engage others, and encourage them, because the terms are wrong, or not sufficient for the result we want.

The Four Reliances, you may know, are

*Don't rely on the teacher, rely on the teaching;*  
*Don't rely on the words, rely on the meaning;*

*Don't rely on the provisional, rely on the definitive;*

and,

*Don't rely on ordinary awareness, rely on wisdom*

- and it's this last one that feels like it is the Way here.

It's saying that, with some kinds of minds, problems don't resolve, but with wisdom, or insight, it's workable. At least that's how I read it now, out of necessity.

I had this image for a time of how being caught feels: It's like a fly in a bottle - going up and down and back and forth, banging into the glass, but not getting any further, for all its' desperate efforts, and oh, have mercy! This is on account of staying in just this one framework, when something else *entirely* is needed.

Perhaps you can relate it to those who hallucinate, or imagine things that aren't there - it is the same with every ordinary consciousness, that believes so fully in its own view. Something qualitatively different is needed, and knowing this saves so much energy, of struggle, or speaking when it's not effective to do so.

*Don't rely on ordinary consciousness, rely on wisdom.*

This is the great remedy, and it saves a lot of time and energy that we may otherwise use trying to change some situation, but without having a complete method to do so.

In those same teachings on the Two Truths, they then make the interesting point that the purpose of the conventional view practices are just so that we can gradually understand, take up, and accomplish what transcends

this point of view. In Buddhism, we need to be clear that this is the aim. This is what is known as freedom.

I'm really glad we can share this much.

Thank you so much, and may we all together realize liberation.

## From Notes on the Two Truths

How to understand the nature of appearances, or falsehoods we carry with us, the misunderstandings of ourselves and one another, and, without negating that, also not buying into it completely, and having it dictate our lives? These are the questions I bring to this study.

\* \* \*

A friend works as a counsellor, supporting people in hospital and prison settings. He's also been dealing with some family dynamics where two people he is close to disagree and are each holding tightly to their views.

I wrote the following to him:

I was listening to the first in a series of talks on the Two Truths by Ringu Tulku this evening and much of what I've been thinking about regarding this subject, as exemplified by what you are recounting was there in full display.

I'll let you know when or if I get anywhere with the subject, but for now, I would offer these thoughts, as they apply. You know, sometimes it's good just to have clear questions, so we know what we are looking for, and if we sense a clue or a way forward in what we're learning about.

Maybe you've heard something about these teachings already - it would seem they are part of the Middle Way as expressed in the Gelugpa Lineage.

I've wondered about perception / right view, and how to maintain this and navigate those states and meeting with others where the view is not inclusive of deeper truth. I'm glad we have Dharma languages to communicate with (part II of what I'm celebrating in our communication)

In any case, I am sure you have had plenty of experience validating others' experience, even when they are mistaken about themselves and those around them. You are in direct contact with the most extreme examples, but I have been thinking of it as the same, essentially, with K and your brother. There is some point of view that needs to be validated, affirmed as their truth (relative truth) and its effects, without reifying it, which blocks out so much that relative truth is sometimes called 'concealing truth'. We see only one side of it when we're just seeing relative truth, and can't imagine any other perspective, let alone one that goes beyond identification with some experience.

\* \* \*

### The Eye of the Beholder

I have been thinking of something remarkable I noticed when first meeting the Eastern spiritual traditions. In the West, for the most part, we take our perceptions to be separate from ourselves - such that what we see in ourselves or in another we take to be 'out there', independent of our own mind and heart. The Eastern Traditions turn it around and tell us that as we change our mind, our experience changes. This goes all the way to Right View, about ourselves, and others, and our world. We undergo a 'change of lineage' experience - from a samsaric being to one with greater freedom of mind. The challenge then becomes maintaining that in all situations - holding the relative and ultimate or transcendent truths together at once.

I think also at this point the traditional analogy given for different relative perceptions, where a hungry ghost mind would see water as a repulsive substance, a human would see it simply as what we think of as water, and a deva, or a being with a more pure, subtle and refined mind would see it as a delightful, nourishing and sustaining substance, as nectar.

Water is used as an example, but it implies all experience -

What we experience is not separate from our own mind.

*The Ten Dharma Realms Are Not Outside a Single Thought,*

as he Venerable Hsuan Hua taught.

What is the truth of all this, we may ask? What is *the ultimate nature* of water? Is it not always dependent on the one perceiving?, and in line with the Vajrayana View, of Pure Perception, or Sacred Outlook, seen or not, would it not always be *The Way Things Truly Are*?

\* \* \*

The teachings on The Two Truths can tend towards enlightenment. *They are not expressing subjective-ism*, which would be like saying that this one substance we call 'water' is - whatever beings perceive it as. That's the relative truth of the matter of course, undeniably, but there is delusion, and there is wisdom: the fact that *it can be experienced as nectar* by a clear, undistorted, awakened mind is the ultimate, enduring, verifiable truth of it.

*It is there whether we see it or not.*

In the half-light, person may see a rope as a snake, and then later, in the full sun, will see his or her mistake - and the fear they had will vanish in that very moment. It had a nature that wasn't seen, and instead, another thought was superimposed onto that - and reacted to. The truth was not seen, and then it was.

In the same way, we see what is not, and react to it, and then, when we awaken we see what has always been here.

*The Divine*

*This world, the Pure Land, this very body the Buddha*



as it says in Zen teachings.

We suffer when we don't know our own nature, or the true nature of others, or of our world. This suffering itself leads us to look for its resolution, leads us to realized teachers, and to the study, and practice, and accomplishment of their teachings.

\* \* \*

As far as the Two Truths, recently I had some personal sense of what I'd heard for a long time about 'provisional truth', and that made me want to go back and review and go forward with the Traditional teachings on the subject. What's in books, generally, for me at least can seem quite removed from our lives, whereas I think this is really the most immediate, most compelling subject.

It's another way of saying *Right View* and it aims to be inclusive of all the ways we err, or can have mistaken perceptions, illusion, or delusion, to changing, correcting our view, as someone on the path, right up to wisdom-realization.

There are some ways I think we can engage this - just looking at our own mind and heart, sometimes we're more clear, and *actually understand* who we are and what we see, and other times, we've been mistaken. This much, to me, is onward leading, as they say...

I'll let you know if I get anywhere with it. Mostly right now I have more questions, but they are fruitful areas to look into, I do believe. You know, having compassion, freeing ourselves from ignorance and suffering and helping all others as much as we can, that's what this life is for, and so, wherever love takes you, that's where you should go, surely.

\* \* \*

\* \* \*

The Two Truths are part of the Middle Way teachings, perhaps a continuation, or further practical explanation of that. Generally, the two truths are spoken of as the way things appear, and the way things exist.

\* \* \*

I got stuck for a while thinking of what to do with some challenging problem / person, depression and anxiety, and delusion

Then I was reading about the Two Truths and one commentary mentioned the Four Reliances:

*Don't rely on the teacher, rely on the teaching;*  
*Don't rely on the words, rely on the meaning;*  
*Don't rely on the provisional, rely on the definitive;*  
 and,  
*Don't rely on ordinary awareness, rely on wisdom.*

and, as I mentioned, it's this last one that especially attracted my attention again.

It's saying that, with some kinds of minds, the problems don't resolve, but with wisdom, insight, it's workable.

At least that's how I read it now, out of necessity.

It's a great remedy, and it saves a lot of time and energy that we may use trying to change some situation, but without having the method to do so.

Then they say that everything else - all the relative practices - are so we and others are able to access those profound, liberating experiences.

We sure do need a lot of patience and compassion though, for ourselves and for everyone else.

\* \* \*

I was looking for a way to resolve some questions about self perception, or mistaken, attached to perceptions of self and others, and was feeling like I wasn't getting anywhere, none of the answers I heard and thought about seemed like a way forward

But then reading that, and remembering what it says, I could see how this is actually workable. *It can actually be resolved, if we're skillful, aiming towards wisdom.* A lot doesn't resolve otherwise. It's grounding too, surprisingly!

In a way, it's simple, but we forget - well, at least I do, and so I struggle alone and with others and this world, all of us seemingly in this shared dream world, until a Buddha appears and offers another way.

The teaching on the Two Truths is encompassing way to think about our lives here. This is something I'm thinking about, so that we can it apply everywhere. Some ways of framing things are more inclusive, and I have been looking for that, out of necessity, it seems.

This phrase *The Eye of the Beholder* came to mind.

These teachings are very much in line with what I hear taught, for example, when Lama Zopa says to view our experiences with the thought '*This is my karmic perception*'

We take so much for granted that can be looked into, and worked with, when we have this as a starting point - that *our experience can change.*

Maybe you've heard there's this one poem where Rumi says

*The clear bead in the center changes everything*

At least, this is a start for learning, progressively, to have right view.

Maybe it's a matter of waking up in some way that we know, and staying awake.

As it says in *The Little Prince*,

*It is only with the heart that one can see rightly*

and so much follows from that, so much that would otherwise be a struggle, or not make much sense.

So, how to do this?

I really get optimistic at this point because I feel like I and we can all learn from each other, from schoolchildren, from our elders, and traditions - they all have something precious to say about this.

I can easily imagine a world where this is what is taught to everyone, from an early age, spoken about easily, shared and celebrated.

\* \* \*

I have continued to look into how appearances are accepted, until we see more deeply, and more fully, and then that previous view is held in a larger understanding.

My friends, you are right then to place 'self' in quotes. This is what we engage with, surely, and *there is more*.

In this, the idea that we need a different level of understanding to resolve problems and suffering proves itself. It does seem to be referring to what is

found in these teachings on the Two Truths. For practical purposes, I've just been relying on this idea, that I can keep in mind more easily, that an ultimate or definitive truth (relatively speaking) is what is true, whether we see it or not. *It is verifiable.*

We fixate, thinking of what we see as only that, and immutable, when of course this isn't so, but that persistent illusion is what we somehow overcome, once, twice, as many times as necessary over the years, or lifetimes...

You may have heard, they say it's hard to hold the relative appearances and their non existence in truth in mind at the same time... I don't agree though. I think there are times when we can see both, and engage with others, in an encouraging, and liberating way.

## On Being Unmistaken

The whole subject of the teachings on the Two Truths is Right View, and different language is used to tell us just what this means. Teachings such as these invite us to look into our experiences carefully, and thoroughly, and they offer keys to liberation.

One of the expressions used in this set of teachings refers to our being either *mistaken* or *unmistaken* in what we see and believe. This of course is a challenge, precisely because almost everybody believes they are right when they are holding onto a view. It's only when we have another way of knowing made clear to us that we see the previous view as wrong.

It's like a person waking from a dream - while dreaming they rarely question whether what they are seeing and feeling and experiencing actually exists in the way it appears to their mind. *It's only on waking up* that they realize an unmistakable view, in regards to dream-appearances.

Likewise, a person proverbially 'believing a rope to be a snake' usually has no doubt about their perceptions at that time. It's only when there's more light to see by that they realize and see through their relatively mistaken view and its effects regarding the rope. They see it as a rope and know in retrospect the difference between being mistaken and unmistakable.

We can carry these same analogies forward to what is perceived and held onto regarding ourselves and others. We usually believe absolutely in our ideas, and hold onto them without question, until we learn and investigate these self grasping ideas for ourselves. By comparison we then *see through* those simple mistaken ideas we held, and by comparison we know an unmistakable view as regards to the ideas we had of self.

Gradually we are led to greater clarity, a more complete view in this way.

Dissatisfaction can move us forward

Until we make a thorough study of perception itself, there's bound to be doubt, but this can be a good thing, if we can intelligently question our experience.

For example, in the past we were wrong, and didn't see it - what's to say we are not still dreaming, or deluded now? Or, like a person with jaundice, everything we see may be colored by our views, or karmic perception, and when this is the case, where to begin?

I think we can find a great range when it comes to the clarity of our own perceptions, and recognizing this much can serve our purpose. For example, we *do* know the difference between dream and waking, and between not knowing, but forming ideas anyway, in contrast to learning from study and from our own direct experience.

We can follow our own lead by seeing how the world is when we are at peace, or when our heart is awake to some extent, in meditation, and between sessions. We can learn to cultivate states of calm awareness, and recognize our own experience of sober, unobscured consciousness, that is without dullness or agitation.

They say that the negative emotions, of fear, aggression, pride, or craving veil the mind. They influence or distort perception, and so for a time, when these are absent, and positive states of mind are vividly present, we can see what is more true. To some extent, we can see for ourselves the mistaken and the unmissaken. This much is workable, and can be our very own field of practice and realization.

We also have the examples of our wise teachers, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas to refer to. *They are great lights in this world.*

There is a universal light that can be recognized in different teachings, and teachers, across cultures and throughout time. It is the light we ourselves see by, and, if we are not awakened all at once and forever, then by degrees we can know greater truths, and this endlessly illumined world.

If we are humble enough, and diligent, and see the shadow side of grasping too soon at one view or another that presents itself to our mind, we can continue to learn, gradually becoming free of our lesser, relatively mistaken views, about ourselves, and others, and this world.

Anyone who's given some thought to the problems of fanaticism will be on sharp lookout for arrogance and narrow mindedness in their own study and reflection. So much harm has come into this world on account of people believing they alone have the truth!

One of the Precepts of Thich Nhat Hanh's Order of Interbeing says,

*Do not think the knowledge you presently possess is changeless, absolute truth. Avoid being narrow-minded and bound to present views. Learn and practice nonattachment from views in order to be open to receive others' viewpoints. Truth is found in life and not merely in conceptual knowledge. Be ready to learn throughout your entire life and to observe reality in yourself and in the world at all times.*

This is a fine guideline for our entire life and journey towards greater understanding, peace, and fulfillment.

This study has an end

We may wonder where a study such as this can lead, if we are always to be comparing one state to another. And while it is true that there are different levels we can reach, this study has a specific purpose:



Unmistaken mind, Right View is necessary on account of our suffering, and the suffering in this world. Once we have found the cause of misery, and resolved that, then our own task is finished, and it remains only to teach, and continue the Buddha's dispensation, until all are freed.

## If You Want to Know the Way Out, Seek Wisdom, and Not Emotion

The provisional and the definitive teachings each have a different function in freeing us, personally and collectively, from wrong views and suffering. If we don't know this, we may spend time and energy over the years, expecting a result from practicing one aspect alone, when our attention and energy can be more effectively used.

We get hints that the provisional teachings alone are not enough, for example, in the calm abiding or jhana teachings, where we are reminded that *we need wisdom to uproot the defilements*; and in the teachings on loving kindness, and the other Brahma Viharas, we're told that although we can attain very refined states through these practices, *we need insight to complete our practice*, both for our own sake, and for all those we care for.

As I understand it, the teaching on the Two Truths developed out of Middle Way, Madhyamaka thought, as a practical expression, and a further clear statement of those teachings. One of the things I admire about these particular teachings is that they aim to be inclusive of *all* states of mind, in all realms, from our various mistakes and their results, all the way to the pure, clear mind of wisdom, and freedom. They divide our experiences into *the relative*, and *the ultimate*, which I have defined for practical purposes as *that which is true, whether we see it or not*. This allows room to grow as we learn to see more deeply.

When it comes to practicing with the relative and ultimate truths, we have *the provisional* and *the definitive* teachings.

\*The purpose of all the relative practices, I've seen, is to purify and transform *the qualitative aspect* of our mind and heart;

and the purpose of the definitive teachings is to purify and transform *the conceptual aspect* of the mind, *and this* is what brings freedom.

As Shantideva said,

*All of the teachings have been given for the sake of wisdom*

If we depend on the provisional to accomplish what only the definitive can do, we will be disappointed. We will not realize our aim. At this point, we need wisdom, in the form of insight into our true nature.

We do need both the relative practices, and the definitive. They each have an essential role to play in our fulfillment, but they are different.

The necessary relative practices, such as ethics, patience, meditation, generosity, the purification of faults, renunciation, faith and devotion, are also called *provisional* in the sense that they enable us to move from one place to another; they prepare the ground, they nurture and sustain us, just as our everyday provisions do, and they provide the necessary supporting conditions where wisdom-insight can arise and become strong.

To make the distinction, in Mipham's *Sword of Wisdom*, it says,

*Whichever sutras (teachings and practices) are directed toward engaging the path are called provisional, and whichever sutras are directed towards engaging the result are called definitive.*

*In more detail, whichever sutras teach about the self, living beings, and a self where there is (in fact) not a self are called the provisional teaching;*

*And whichever sutras teach about emptiness, the signless, the wishless, and the absence of self - these teachings on the doors to liberation are called the definitive meaning.*

There's a well known quote of Einstein where he says, *We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them.*

And I found an exposition on this idea from Babaji Bob Kindler. He said,

*You can't solve a problem created at one level with a solution that is also at that same level; you have to go to the next level and get the solution and then apply it back to the earlier level of the problem.*

This is *exactly* what we should be aiming to do in Buddhism. If we don't, but instead get caught up in an emotion, which feels right and does have some truth to it, the problems, and the suffering do not resolve. In every case, the freedom from suffering we seek comes from wisdom.

I heard this line back in the early 1990's that has stayed with me to these many years.

Back then, I was careful not to take initiations I was not ready for, especially when they involved commitments. I remember calling the hosts here in Northern California of Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche, who was scheduled to give a Manjushri empowerment at Pema Osel Ling. I asked the person who answered the phone if he could ask Rinpoche if there was any commitment accompanying this initiation, and I could hear him in the background be asked and say, *'Is there a commitment? Yes, Seek wisdom, and not emotion'*, which the host then repeated to me.

Wisdom has a dispassionate quality to it that allows us to see more deeply than when we are stirred up, even with a righteous emotion, such as referential, subjective compassion, or devotion to a teacher or to an ideal. By comparison, whether we like to hear it or not, that kind of mind stays on the surface. So much of what I see in our modern social political engagement is strong on emotion, but without the insight that can finally resolve these challenges, of racism, violence, greed and corruption.

The hard part to express about this is that we need more than emotion. There *is* truth to the wisdom of our feeling nature, and it *is* necessary to educate our emotions to the truth, but that is only the qualitative, the

provisional, the relative, and not the complete right view, which has the right conceptual understanding, and gives the definitive answer.

We are naturally attached to what we know on some level is a right, true, and appropriate way of responding, but we need to ask ourselves if our view is complete, and if we are achieving our aims, with just our passionate convictions. If we have not yet accomplished our goals, personally or collectively, then we have to think more deeply about what could be missing, and this, for me is where the teachings on the Two Truths are invaluable.

In terms of practice, we need both the provisional and the definitive, working together towards our one end, of resolving suffering, personally, in our communities, and in our world. From the outside, they may seem to be contradictory, involving as they do self and no self (or what transcends the self), but when practiced, all this becomes clear.

Ani Tenzin Palmo said,

*The ego (wrong view) dissolves naturally through deep insight into the nature of mind... until then it is the self, the ego that walks the path...*

and in *The Buddha Within*, Shenpen Hookham says,

*One cannot rely on the dualistic, deluded mind to undo its own delusions (which is using the same kind of mind that created the problems)*

*Finally, it is the non-deluded, noncompounded, nondual (knowledge of the) ultimate reality itself that has the real power to remove delusions...*

This distinction, and the balance and harmony of the relative and the ultimate comprise the whole of the spiritual path.

We can fully understand these two aspects, and how to apply them most efficiently, guided by our noble spiritual friends.

{This series of articles concludes with an essay on the inseparability of the two truths.}

## The Inseparability of the Two Truths

There is an easy way to recognize the inseparable nature of the relative and enduring truth. If we begin with enlightened activity, we can see their essential unity, plain as day.

There have been times for all of us, I'm sure, when we have given or received help and support *that happened spontaneously, creatively, and in a way that surely felt not-separate*. These are the very characteristics of enlightened activity- the compassionate motivation, together with the intelligence or wisdom responding to the needs of the moment.

Now, we can't say that the words spoken, or written, or the compassionate gestures were at all separate from this awakened nature we can find in our teachers and in ourselves- they are the expressions of this nature, like the rays of the sun.

As Suzuki Roshi said,

*Strictly speaking, there are no enlightened people, there is only enlightened activity.*

And as the Thai Forest Master, Ajahn Maha Boowa said,

*For an enlightened being, there is no other response to the human condition, than compassion.*

In the same way, the work that we do, and our everyday activities are not at all apart from the true, unchanging basis, the ground of our living.

What we call 'the relative' is just this nature rising to meet the needs of the time, and these expressions are not for a moment separate from the ultimate truth.

One way of thinking of the ultimate, or definitive truth is *the way things are, whether it is seen or not*. This gives us room to gradually learn, and it accommodates all the mistaken or partial beliefs a person can have in a larger view.

Seeing the unity of the two truths, the relative and the definitive is onward leading. We gradually learn to see more clearly and more fully.

Another term for the relative is *the provisional*, which I like because of its connotations - *provisions* are what enable us to get from one place to another. *They are all necessary*. They fulfill an essential function.

We may easily overlook what seems to be commonplace, the transient, the ephemeral, preferring the lasting, the sure and reliable, but this life of freedom and helpful activity is fully realized through the temporal.

The two truths, the relative and ultimate are known then to be essentially one. They are two aspects of one truth, that when well understood are of equal importance.



## Foundations

*Gravity is the root of grace...*

Everything that is made to last has a strong foundation to support it. Think about it. A well made house, with deep pilings into rock far beneath what we see; the powerful trunk of a tree, with a vast, extensive root system;

An accomplished musician has put thousands of hours into the simplest of technical exercises, scales, arpeggios, shifting, and just producing a good tone. They can then go on to play the most complex pieces, with an effortlessness that belies the underlying structure supporting their performance.

Or, *a pyramid*, with a broad base that can then be built up one level at a time.

This same principle - that a strong foundation is needed for anything lasting - also holds true when it comes to spiritual study and practice. In Buddhism and other Traditions, ethics comes first, as the basis for cultivating calm and clarity that can reach deeper into this experience of being alive. That is then the solid ground for insight to arise, and this insight, or understanding then needs to be grounded in our life and practice, again, through the further cultivation of right conduct and meditation.

Right conduct here means generally actions that do no harm to ourselves or to any others, and that support our health and well being. Meditation refers in this instance to calm abiding practice, which only starts out on the level of intellectual study and reflection, but is primarily about quieting down and being in one's body and feelings, using the strength of discernment and the mind's own natural clarity to refine and assimilate what we have learned.

Without a good foundation, either we'll stay on the surface, or, once having had some insight, it will not remain as an active factor for long. How much meditation we need is surely an individual matter, but without enough practice to digest new knowledge or understanding, we will not gain the full benefit of our study and realization.

When we speak of digesting and assimilating some understanding, we're talking about the sometimes very gradual process of learning a new way of seeing, or *a new way of being*. It can be described as an unlearning in some ways, but these are referring to the same process, of *being made anew*. The basis and causes of this being possible are the mostly hidden practices of calm, and the conscientiousness that is its support.

When working up to some new understanding, we can proceed like this. Then, when we've begun to learn something, we can take that new knowledge with us and thoroughly absorb it, with time, and attention, and patience.

The image of a pyramid is useful here - the base being in touch with the earth of our living, quiet, humble, and dedicated; its builders not reluctant to do the unglamorous labor, of digging and hauling, and doing solid work, brick by brick. The new life built on such a foundation is sure to last.

## The Continual Practice of Right View

### Before, during, and after meditation

When we practice any meditation method, there are always either the realization of truth, or some degree of a mistaken conception in it. The best possible way of practicing, of course, would be to have no wrong view from the very beginning, then during the practice itself, and at its conclusion, and between sessions. This is not easy to do, especially when starting out. It should be known why and how this can be done, though, and so I've assembled these reasonings and reflections from Traditional and modern sources and added a few comments, for my own sake, and for the sake of all those who would realize freedom and peace, and have the best gift to offer all beings.

I've divided how this can be understood, and how the practice of right view can be applied into *three parts*, what comes before meditation, the understanding that comes from study and contemplation; then in actual sessions of meditation, and finally the concluding practices, which includes the dedication of merit, and how we go about living our daily lives. All these three periods then can be the continuous practice of wisdom.

#### *Part I. If sentient beings don't exist as we believe...*

In Buddhism, the cause of human suffering is a self grasping ignorance that is habitual and pervasive. When this is seen through, or seen for what it is, we experience ourselves and others and our world differently. Grasping at a self unconsciously cuts us off from our ancestors, our teachers, from one another and from our natural world. Removing this false view, we awaken to our connectedness, and inner treasures, joy, compassion, and peace. We enter into a dynamic, creative involvement with all our family and world.

This is the realization that brings an end to samsara, the potentially endless wandering in states of suffering, born of ignorance of our true nature, the

nature of everyone else, and this world. This is the knowledge that enables us to help others in provisional ways, becoming sensitive to their needs, with energy and awareness, and it is the means of our being able to help in ultimate ways, by our teaching and example, being a catalyst for their own realization of truth.

How then can we make our way to freedom and to being able to help others? What is the method? There is learning involved, surely, and reflection, questioning, quiet meditation, refining the mind, and working our way through difficult points by ourselves, and with the help of our teachers.

We can begin here: It's taught that the way ordinary people conceive of themselves and others is not the truth. It is fragmentary at best. We think of ourselves as permanent selves, independent, and unitary, as in - of a single nature. This is wrong view, continually appearing to untrained minds. How to proceed?

From Metta and Wisdom:

The freedom from problems, and the attainment of the highest happiness is naturally what all wish for ourselves, and those we care for, and so, of course the question, or sticking point presents itself: how can we wish happiness for ourselves or another if they don't exist as we imagine?

When this question comes up, it's something of a landmark, I think. It means we're trying to integrate these two aspects of the path, of love and wisdom, and something doesn't seem to fit. But this only means that we haven't yet taken the wisdom side far enough. Resolving this question is of central importance in Mahayana Buddhism, with its vow to help all beings to freedom and ease.

What our senses and concepts present to us, and what we then fixate on, is not what is actually there. We can learn to see through our imaginings, and in fact, out of compassion, this is something we need to learn to do.

*Part II a. In Meditation - From The Key Points of the Middle Way*

The result of analysis needs to be unified with deep, powerful, and wakeful calm abiding meditation, free of faults, over a sustained period of time.

Ignorance exists in us, until removed, in gross, subtle, and very subtle forms. To remove the cause of suffering in its most subtle form, we need to generate a very subtle and thoroughgoing, awake wisdom consciousness. Anything less than this would be just dealing with problems relatively on the surface, leaving the root cause of all our samsaric sufferings intact, to manifest again and again and again.

Only when this wisdom that thoroughly understands the nature of experience is then applied on the subtle innermost level, over a sustained period of time, long enough to transform the mind, can we ultimately cure all the sufferings of samsara.

\* \* \*

The way we can have both wisdom and compassion present in our mind then is explained by the Eighth century saint, Shantideva, in his Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life, where he asks,

*'If no beings exist [in ultimate reality], toward whom should we have compassion?*

and he answers:

*'To attain the result [of buddhahood, which is to be achieved only through the awakening of great compassion], one should direct one's compassion toward whatever it is that unenlightened beings call 'beings'.*

The modern day Tibetan teacher, Deshung Rinpoche, also taught on this same subject, when he said:

*'On the conventional level of reality, beings do not exist as they are perceived by other unenlightened beings. The bodhisattva realizes that, in ultimate reality, there are no beings who exist as unenlightened beings think, but he directs his mind toward those beings as they perceive themselves.*

*'On the ultimate level, he sees no beings, but he realizes that on the conventional level, beings think they exist and do experience suffering. Out of objectless compassion, therefore, he directs his mind toward them.'*

Integrating this insight

The insight that is gained through deep practice is different from intellectual understanding alone, and that has to be fully integrated into our lives and all our interactions. We do this by continued learning and reflection, and by continually cultivating our understanding, both in meditation time and during our daily lives.

*Part II b. During practice itself as presented in the Vajrayana*

*The Buddha's activities are magical displays that dispel the sufferings of living beings, taught Khenpo Palden Sherab Rinpoche*

And Freda Bedi said, *'Mahayana is the philosophy, and Vajrayana is the practice'*.

We can represent *our motivation and Right View* to our minds symbolically in practices that use visualization.

The following is adapted from a teaching by Khenpo Palden Sherab Rinpoche:

*(In Vajrayana) We aspire to a nonconceptually performed practice, free from grasping or clinging. This means that when we practice or meditate, we should not relate to our visualization as if it were a solid object.*

*Our visualization must be experienced as a dynamic display of the true nature, like a transcendent wisdom rainbow body. We must understand that the visualization is totally empty of inherent existence, yet totally full of dynamic energies of love, compassion, and wisdom.*

Here is where we can use meditation to integrate our understanding. We train in seeing the world we live in as translucent, made of light, and holy, and that we are upheld by countless Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, Saints and Sages, ancestors, and the sacred powers of the earth, sky, water, and fire. In this way, the tantras affirm that divine help is always available in abundance. Visualization in this way is the expression of Right View.

We can represent the way things are by the practice of seeing ourselves and others and this world as transparent like a rainbow, with light shining through, appearing and yet ungraspable. What's more, when we realize our inherent worth and the preciousness of ourselves and others and this world, we can intentionally visualize all this as being divine in nature, poetically adorned with jewels, exalted, and uplifting to behold in every way.

With this Right View and a pure motivation, as we recite verses of refuge and aspiration prayers, meditate, and recite mantra, we visualize that we receive blessings from the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, and from all the Bodhisattvas and Devas in the form of light and nectar. These dissolve into ourselves, and into all those we see as being with us now, our family and friends, those we don't know, and those who are experiencing any difficulty at all...

We visualize that the light and nectar heals and calms, and nourishes, and inspires us all.

*May all share in these blessings.*

*May all beings receive all they need to awaken and be free.*

*May all beings have happiness, and all the causes of happiness flourishing.*

Meditate like this... Make prayers of aspiration...

*Part III. Dedicating the merit of formal practice and carrying Right View into our daily lives*

Khenpo Choga has said:

*'The strongest way to dedicate merit is called 'a dedication that does not conceptualize the three factors'. This dedication is done while recognizing the buddha nature. In that recognition there is no subject who dedicates the merit, no merit to be dedicated and no object who receives the merit. A mind that has truly realized the buddha nature actually does pervade the totality of space so the dedication of such a mind actually reaches all beings in all universes. This is the most powerful form of dedication.'*

A reflection from the teachings of Lama Zopa Rinpoche:

All phenomena - including the I, the action of dedicating, the merits that are dedicated, the goal of enlightenment to which they are dedicated, and the sentient beings for whom they are dedicated - are completely empty of existing from their own side. With the continual awareness of this, I now impute labels, and dedicate...

In the words of the Avatamsaka Sutra:

*To all internal and external worlds  
Bodhisattvas have no attachment at all,  
Yet do not abandon works beneficial to sentient beings;  
The great ones cultivate this kind of knowledge.*



*In all lands in the ten directions  
They do not depend or dwell on anything;  
They do not grasp things, such as livelihood,  
And do not arbitrarily create distinctions.*

*They engage with all sentient beings  
In all worlds in the ten directions;  
Observing their essential nature,  
They practice dedication reaching everywhere.*

May all beings be safe  
May they be healthy  
May they be happy, and at peace

How else can we continue the practice of wisdom in our daily lives?

Unless we are on retreat, most of the time we are not engaged in study or formal meditation, so it's of vital importance that we find ways to continue through our days whatever insights we have gained from our study and contemplation. If we're only wise when we're sitting or walking then the experience is still only a precious seed that needs mindfulness to flower into realization, which is stable, and with us at all times.

Integrating Wisdom begins with our understanding and insight. By our study and practice, quiet meditation, and our own investigations and analysis, we can then tell when ignorance / wrong view or Transcendent Intelligence is functioning in our daily life. This is like telling the difference between being asleep or day dreaming, and believing in the reality of our dreams, or waking up, and knowing they were just thoughts, just dreams. Khenpo Karthar taught:

*'There is nothing wrong with appearances. They are not in themselves an obstacle. It is our confusion about them that is the obstacle. Because of our confused habit of fixating on appearances as being true and real, we cling to them and to our*

*concepts about them and experience suffering. When we realize at the moment they arise that these appearances have no true existence, then appearances will never be a problem or obstacle for us again.'*

To continue this practice, there are phrases we can keep in mind throughout the day. For example,

The Eight Verses of Thought Transformation concludes with

*Realizing the nature of appearances,  
I will liberate my mind from the bondage of attachment*

And the Seven Point Mind Training Teachings has the instruction:

*Between sessions, be a child of illusion...*

Geshe Rabten said:

*'When we are out of formal meditation on emptiness and again have to experience our external environment, we should regard the mistaken view we have of it, which will still continue to arise, as merely the illusory creation of the ignorant propensities in our mind. Since we have seen previously in the meditational period that the object of such a mistaken view is empty of independent existence, we should regard this deceptive view of things as completely false, just as the conjurer regards his illusory creations... This will help to diminish the force of the ignorance that clings to the independent existence of all phenomena. Thus, meditation and post-meditation sessions will be mutually beneficial.'*

This is as important as formal practice itself.

*The thought 'this is my karmic perception...'*

In preparation for dream yoga, students are encouraged to view their experience with the thought, *this is my karmic perception*. Hard as it may be

to believe, we can see how this is true when we engage some practice that changes our mind, and our experience. Usually we don't regard our own mind as contributing anything at all to the way we experience things, but carrying this thought with us, and experimenting with it, shows us the nature of our thoughts and experience. It helps us to awaken, see through our projections, and touch reality.

Lama Yeshe prayed:

*May all sentient beings discover that all the appearances of their ego are projections of their mind. Whatever self-existent thoughts, whatever concrete concepts of objects, whatever fears they have, may they discover them to be mental projections. and also may the nature of mind be recognized as non-dual.*

This completes a description of how to practice Buddhist Wisdom teachings in a cycle of three periods of time, before, during, and after meditation, supportive of each other.

*May all beings realize the nature of mind,  
liberating wisdom, uprooting suffering,  
May that knowledge not decline,  
and may it be integrated throughout all their lives*

## Books on the Two Truths

Relative Truth, Ultimate Truth: The Foundation of Buddhist Thought,  
Geshe Tashi Tsering

The Two Truths, by Khenpo Tsultrim Gyatso

Appearance and Reality: The Two Truths, by Guy Newland

The Sword of Wisdom, by Khenpo Palden Sherab Rinpoche