

Kadampa Center

Clarifying the Middle Way: Lama Tsongkhapa's *In Praise of Dependent Origination*

*That which is dependent origination
Is explained to be emptiness.
That, being a dependent designation,
Is itself the middle way.*

*There does not exist anything
That is not dependently arisen.
Therefore there does not exist anything
That is not empty.*

-Arya Nagarjuna, Verses 24.18/19 of *Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*
Translated by Jay Garfield in *Ocean of Reasoning*

1. Regarding the concepts of dependent-arising and emptiness

From *Dependent-Arising and Emptiness* by Elizabeth Napper: Dependent-arising and emptiness are two crucial concepts within Buddhism. Difficult to understand and subject to a variety of interpretations, an understanding of them and of their compatibility can serve as a key revealing the essence of the Buddha's teachings.

In very brief form, dependent-arising, labeled by the present Dalai Lama "Buddha's slogan", indicates the inter-relatedness of all things in the universe. Things arise dependent on causes and conditions, they gain their identities in relation to other things. Nothing stands alone, autonomous and isolated, but instead exists only in a web of interconnectedness. Like near and far, all things are relative, dependent on their causes, on their parts, or on their relationship to something else. Things are always in flux, always changing; there are no independent autonomous entities.

Emptiness expresses this same idea from another viewpoint. All things are empty. Empty of what? Of being independent autonomous entities, of having some "own thing", some intrinsic nature that comes from their own side without depending on external causes and conditions or on a subjective factor of those who observe them. As solid, substantial, and graspable as things - persons, tables, chairs, or anything - may seem, when sought among the parts that make them up, there is nothing that can be pointed to as that thing itself. The non-finding of something when it is sought analytically is its emptiness. If things existed in the palpable, independent way we imagine them to, they would have to be such that they could be found when sought - but they cannot. In fact, when sought analytically in this way in meditation, they disappear altogether. When searching among the parts or collection of the parts of a table for the table, or among the mind and body for the person, and not coming up with the object sought, at some point the conventional phenomenon drops away and one is left with only the absence of what was sought, with a mere vacuity that is emptiness.

This fact of meditative experience might lead to the conclusion that emptiness and the conventional world are incompatible, that emptiness cancels ordinary phenomena, which would exist so long as one has not realized emptiness and would cease to do so once emptiness is realized. Perhaps all that we see around us is only an illusion, a fabrication of our lack of understanding of the true nature of reality, which is only emptiness. But what is one to do then with dependent-arising? How does such a nihilistic emptiness fit with the Buddha's carefully formulated teachings such as the doctrine of karma - responsibility for the effects of all one's actions - and with the instructions on proper ethics and the precise delineations of the many varieties of phenomena? Why bother if all this is false, only illusion?

These are questions with which Buddhists have struggled over the more than two thousand years since the time of the Buddha, and numerous different schools and sects have arisen based on different ways of resolving these and other questions. The dilemma concerning the relationship of dependent-arising and emptiness is a particular issue for the Middle Way, or Madhyamika, school. Founded by the great Indian scholar and yogi Nagarjuna in the early centuries of our era, Madhyamika has consistently been a focus of doctrinal controversy. Other philosophical schools do not take as uncompromising a stance regarding emptiness and the utter unfindability of objects, and, as a result, Madhyamika has been accused by other schools, both Buddhist and non-Buddhist, of having gone too far and fallen into nihilism. Even within Madhyamika, varying strands of interpretation have arisen as later commentators worked out their own solutions to the accusations of conflict between emptiness and conventional phenomena. (pp.3-5)

2. Regarding the "middle way" between the two extremes in Madhyamika

From *Meditation on Emptiness* by Jeffrey Hopkins: Without considering the difference between Prasangika and Svatantrika, the definition of a Madhyamika in general is:

A proponent of Buddhist tenets who totally refutes [1] all extremes of permanence, i.e., that any phenomenon ultimately exists, and refutes [2] all extremes of annihilation, i.e., that phenomena do not exist conventionally.

[1] Therefore, all Madhyamikas - Prasangikas and Svatantrikas - avoid the extreme of permanence or existence through refuting that phenomena ultimately exist, truly exist, or exist as their own reality. [2] They avoid the extreme of annihilation or non-existence through asserting that all phenomena exist conventionally, or nominally.

The word *madhyama* itself refers to the middle way that things are, the profound meaning of dependent-arising free from the two extremes, permanence and annihilation. The extremes here are misrepresentations of existence and non-existence. Because phenomena do not exist ultimately, the ultimate existence of phenomena is an extreme of existence. Because phenomena do exist conventionally, the non-existence of phenomena conventionally is an extreme of non-existence. Avoiding the extremes of existence and non-existence, however, does not mean that Madhyamikas refrain from making assertions about

existence and non-existence because they do assert that phenomena exist conventionally but not ultimately, even if those assertions exist only nominally. (pp.451-452)

3. Regarding the reasoning of dependent-arising that overcomes the two extremes

From *Meditation on Emptiness* by Jeffrey Hopkins: In the Madhyamika system all phenomena, both impermanent and permanent, are dependent-arising (*pratityasamutpada*). Through the reason of their being dependent-arising, their emptiness is established. The *Questions of Sagaramati Sutra* says:

Those which arise dependently
Are free of inherent existence. (p.161)

Dependent-arising is the king of reasonings because it can, without residue, overcome both extremes. The reasoning is:

All phenomena do not inherently exist because of being dependent-arising.

Or, in its most powerful form:

All phenomena do not inherently exist because of being dependently imputed.

Here, 'all phenomena' means 'each and every phenomenon'. Through ascertaining the reason - that all phenomena are dependent-arising - the extreme of annihilation is avoided, and realization of the dependent-arising of causes and effects is gained. Through ascertaining the thesis - that all phenomena do not inherently exist - the extreme of permanence is avoided, and realization of the emptiness of all phenomena is gained.

Furthermore, through ascertaining the reason - that all phenomena are dependent-arising - the extreme of permanence is avoided because it is realized that phenomena are just interdependently existent, not inherently existent. Through ascertaining the thesis - that all phenomena do not inherently exist - the extreme of annihilation is also avoided because it is realized that only inherent existence is negated, not existence in general. As a yogi progresses in understanding dependent-arising, realization of how the reason and the thesis each avoid the two extremes becomes subtler and subtler. (pp.168-169)

4. Regarding the three levels of dependent-arising

From *Ethics for the New Millennium* by His Holiness the Dalai Lama: As a means to understanding this complexity, I find the concept of dependent origination (in Tibetan *ten del* [Wylie: *rten 'brel*]), articulated by the Madhyamika (Middle Way) school of Buddhist philosophy, to be particularly helpful. According to this, we can understand how things and events come to be in three different ways. At the first level, the principle of cause and effect

whereby all things and events arise in dependence on a complex web of interrelated causes and conditions, is invoked. This suggests that no thing or event can be construed as capable of coming into, or remaining in, existence by itself. For example, if I take some clay and mold it, I can bring a pot into being. The pot exists as an effect of my actions. At the same time, it is also the effect of a myriad of other causes and conditions. These include the combination of clay and water to form its raw material. Beyond this, we can point to the coming together of the molecules, atoms, and other minute particles which form these constituents (which are themselves dependent on innumerable other factors). Then there are the circumstances leading up to my decision to make a pot. And there are the co-operative conditions of my actions as I give shape to the clay. All these different factors make it clear that my pot cannot come into existence independently of its causes and conditions. Rather it is dependently originated.

On the second level, *ten del* can be understood in terms of the mutual dependence which exists between parts and whole. Without parts, there can be no whole; without a whole, the concept of parts makes no sense. The idea of "whole" is predicated on parts, but these parts themselves must be considered to be wholes comprised of their own parts.

On the third level, all phenomena can be understood to be dependently originated because, when we analyze them, we find that, ultimately, they lack independent identity. This can be understood from the way in which we refer to certain phenomena. For example, the words "action" and "agent" presuppose one another. So do "parent" and "child." Someone is a parent only because he or she has children. Likewise, a daughter or son is so called only in relation to them having parents. The same relationship of mutual dependence is seen in the language we use to describe trades or professions. Individuals are called farmers on account of their work on the land. Doctors are so called because of their work in the field of medicine.

In a more subtle way, things and events can be understood in terms of dependent origination when, for example, we ask, What exactly is a clay pot? When we look for something we can describe as its final identity, we find that the pot's very existence - and by implication that of all other phenomena - is to some extent provisional and determined by convention. When we ask whether its identity is determined by its shape, function, its specific parts (that is, being compounded of clay, water, and so on), we find that the term "pot" is merely a verbal designation. There is no single characteristic which can be said to identify it. Nor indeed does the totality of its characteristics. We can imagine pots of different shapes that are no less pots. And because we can only really speak of its existing in relation to a complex nexus of causes and conditions, viewed from this perspective, it has no one defining quality. In other words, it does not exist in and of itself, but rather is dependently originated. (pp.36-38)

From *Emptiness Yoga* by Jeffrey Hopkins: Dependence upon causes and conditions is narrower; dependence upon parts is as wide as everything in all the universes; dependence upon an imputing consciousness, though just as wide in its scope of application, is more difficult to realize. (p.315)

From *Emptiness Yoga* by Jeffrey Hopkins:

"Dependence" indicates a reason [for the absence of inherent existence of things] that is the dependent designation of all phenomena - their being established as mere designations in dependence upon their own bases of designation.

Usually, this third one is explained as establishment as mere designations (or imputations) in dependence upon the conceptual consciousnesses that designate them rather than "in dependence upon their own bases of designation". The second one, then, is described as dependence, reliance, on parts or bases of designation. The parts are the basis of imputation, but you can pay attention to the parts merely as parts or as the basis of imputation. "Basis of imputation" (or "basis of designation") brings to mind the process of imputation of names, whereas just talking about the parts as parts does not necessarily do that. Still, for a Consequentialist, dependence on causes, dependence on parts, dependence on basis of imputation, and dependence on imputing consciousness all draw in the topic of the process of designation. This third interpretation of dependent-arising as "the dependent designation of all phenomena" is unique to the Consequence School.

This is a feature of only this supreme system; it is not common to Autonomists and below.

Although the third interpretation of dependent-arising is distinctive to the Consequentialists, this does not mean that you cannot take the second, for example, and find in it the Consequentialists' distinctive meaning, the third interpretation. Although the Consequentialists use all three and see all three as deep, Jang-gya is speaking within the context of differentiating three levels of meaning of increasing profundity. (p.318)

From *Emptiness Yoga* by Jeffrey Hopkins: Thus, "causes and conditions" has a threefold meaning - first, as the producers of an object, then as the parts that are the bases of designation of an object, and then as the conceptual consciousness that designates an object. If you understand the arising of an object in dependence upon its parts, try viewing those parts as the basis of imputation of the object, and then shift your attention to the imputing awareness. Through this route, the full force of things' dependence on the mind will come home. The basis of imputation is not the phenomenon imputed; thus, a conceptual consciousness is needed to impute the imputed phenomenon in dependence upon that basis of imputation. If such were not needed, it could exist independently.

Therefore, the "causes and conditions" in Chandrakirti's phrase "in reliance upon causes and conditions" should not be taken as only the causes and conditions of compounded phenomena such as seeds, water, manure, and so forth. That it must also refer to the imputing conceptual consciousness is the special thought of the glorious Chandrakirti and the Foremost Great Being [Lama Tsongkhapa]. (p.319)

5. Regarding the lower schools' view of dependent-arising as confirming inherent existence

From *Emptiness Yoga* by Jeffrey Hopkins: The lower systems say that, to the contrary, dependent-arising is a reason proving true existence. When a Proponent of the Middle Way School says, "The subject, I, is not truly existent because of being a dependent-arising," the lower systems answer that there is contradictory entailment. For them, whatever is a dependent-arising must be truly existent. (p.315)

From *A Commentary to Lama Tsongkhapa's Praise to Dependent-Arising* by Geshe Jampa Tegchok: Childish beings - those who lack wisdom - have their reasons for maintaining the conception grasping at inherent existence. For the wise, those same reasons are a method for cutting the conception grasping at inherent existence. We all understand that if we plant grains of rice we can only grow rice, we cannot grow peas or barley. Also, the inner fact is commonly known that virtuous and non-virtuous karmas clearly produce their own results. Knowing these things, those who are unwise think that phenomena exist from their own side and are inherently existent. They think that the fact that rice seeds only give rise to rice plants means that rice is inherently existent. Thus the understanding of the straightforward process of cause and effect leads the unwise into the mistaken conception that grasps at inherent existence. This is the meaning of strengthening bondage to extreme views [as set out in Verse 6].

For Prasangikas, understanding that different causes bring their different results is a means to cut the various elaborations of the conception of inherent existence. For them, it is a method for ascertaining that things do not exist naturally, and for ascertaining the non-inherent existence of all phenomena. In the "Great Exposition of the Stages of the Path," Lama Tsongkhapa says, "When the unwise recognize that compounded phenomena depend upon causes and conditions, they confirm their conception that grasps at inherent existence, whereas, by understanding that compounded phenomena are dependent upon causes and conditions, the Prasangikas realize the non-inherent existence of those phenomena." "The unwise" includes all followers of tenets from the Madhyamika Svatantrika down to the Vaibhashikas. (p.32)

6. Regarding the four types of fearlessnesses (re: Outline 2B2A-1B; verses 28-30)
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From *A Commentary to Lama Tsongkhapa's Praise to Dependent-Arising* by Geshe Jampa Tegchok: If we clearly understand how the childish are held within cyclic existence by clinging to the idea that dependent-arising are inherently existent, and how those who are wise are able to benefit by proving that dependent-arising are non-inherently existent, we will come to understand other important points within the teachings, such as the validity of Buddha's four fearless declarations ...

Without fear of contradiction, Buddha made four declarations to gatherings of multitudes of human scholars and gods such as Brahma. [1] He declared that he had perfect

understanding of all phenomena, being able to see all things in one moment as clearly as an olive in the palm of his hand; [2] that he had abandoned all faults that were to be abandoned; [3] that the defilements, such as the conception of true existence, are the obscurations to liberation; and [4] that the wisdom realizing selflessness uproots the cause of cyclic existence and liberates beings from bondage. Buddha had no hesitation in declaring these four things to be true. We too will realize they are true when we understand the reasons why the wise see dependent-arising as the reason for establishing that phenomena are empty of inherent existence, and why the childish strengthen their wrong views by thinking that if something is a dependent-arising it must be inherently existent. (p.71)

From *Meditation on Emptiness* by Jeffrey Hopkins: The four fearlessnesses:

1. fearlessness with respect to the assertion, 'I am completely and perfectly enlightened with respect to all phenomena.' For, one will not encounter even the name of an opponent who could correctly say that one does not know such and such a phenomenon. It is achieved through lacking any stinginess with respect to the doctrine.
2. fearlessness with respect to teaching that the afflictive obstructions are obstacles to liberation and that the obstructions to omniscience are obstacles to simultaneous cognition of all phenomena, and that, therefore, these are to be ceased. For, one will not encounter even the name of an opponent who could correctly say that reliance on desire and so forth would not obstruct a being from liberation. It is achieved through not falling under the influence of an obstructive doctrine.
3. fearlessness with respect to teaching the paths of deliverance. For, there is no opponent who could say correctly that these paths are not paths leading to liberation. It is achieved through practicing the paths to liberation.
4. fearlessness with respect to asserting that the contaminations have been extinguished. For, one will not see even the name of an opponent who could correctly dispute the assertion that one has attained the cessation of all afflictions and their potencies. It is achieved through formerly abandoning pride. (pp.210-211)

NOTE: These four presented by Jeffrey Hopkins correspond to the four presented by Geshe Jampa Tegchok in the section above as follows: 1:[1]; 2:[3]; 3:[4]; and 4:[2].