

A Step By Step Meditation on the Definitive Meaning

# THE GREAT MIDDLE WAY

By Khenchen Pema Tsewang Rinpoche

Homage to the guru!

Begin by sitting down and relaxing your mind. Next, lay a foundation for your practice by taking refuge and then meditate on the four contemplations that change the mind. Once your mind is filled with renunciation and your fixation towards the entirety of existence has been completely overturned, you will have truly set out on the path to liberation.

The next step involves training in the precious discipline of not harming others. As Aryadeva once wrote:

The Dharma, in brief, is nonviolence.

Hence, take whichever of the seven classes of the vows of individual liberation is appropriate. Since the true cause of the state of buddhahood is the altruistic mindset of bodhicitta, you should also direct your mind towards the contemplative (lojong) practices, as well as bodhicitta, which stems from love and compassion. This process will bring about a workable frame of mind, which is essential for what follows.

The protector Nagarjuna once wrote:

Listen, o fearless one, what need is there to say more?  
The most beneficial piece of advice is just this:  
You must tame your very own mind, the Buddha taught,  
Since the mind lies at the root of all Dharma.<sup>1</sup>

And Palgé Rinpoche<sup>2</sup> taught:

Though there are 84,000 teachings,  
They all come down to the mind alone.

While the bodhisattva Shantideva wrote:

What's the point of engaging in all sorts of practices  
If you don't practice guarding your own mind?

As alluded to in the passages above, all forms of virtue and vice are rooted in the mind. If the mind becomes filled with negativity and self-fixation develops towards the body, possessions, and other such factors, forget about becoming a buddha, you won't even attain liberation! Therefore, it is important to ponder the fact that, though you may start

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<sup>1</sup> 117 of bshes spring

<sup>2</sup> Patrul Rinpoche

out clinging dearly to your body and these other things, in the end you'll have no choice but to part from them and leave them behind.

Having thought this through, you must habituate your mind to giving away the three bases of ego-clinging. The reason here is that, at this point in time, the willingness to give is the thing we are most in need of. You can then move on to meditating on the equality of self and other and exchanging self and other, which will bring about a workable frame of mind, and then pacifying the mind with the meditative absorption of tranquility.

Even if you completely eradicate the root of existence by following these steps, it is still necessary to meditate on selflessness and emptiness, as these are the antidotes to the two obscurations. At the outset of this process, these two factors must be thoroughly ascertained via the wisdom that comes from study and contemplation. This will create an inner experience of certainty concerning the meaning of selflessness. As Jamgön Mipam said over and over again, "Meditation should never be lacking in certainty!" As this is the case, I will now say a bit about the approach one should take to ascertain individual and phenomenal selflessness.

## INDIVIDUAL SELFLESSNESS

Generally speaking, attachment and all the other afflictions, as well as all forms of suffering, occur due to clinging to an "I" or "self." *An Introduction to the Middle Way* explains:

Once the mind has seen that the afflictions and faults  
Arise from the view of the transitory collection...

And in the *Elucidation of Valid Cognition*:

When there is self, one conceives of other,  
And from self and other come clinging and aggression.  
Becoming thoroughly enmeshed in these factors  
Brings about every problem there is.

As pointed out here, when we latch onto the existence of the self, there is grasping. Our craving for existence then prompts us to wish for our own happiness, while our craving for annihilation creates a desire to be free from suffering.

Under the influence of ignorance, furthermore, we end up completely identifying with a particular birthplace. The same text reads:

The attachment we have towards a self  
Makes us unable to be led by other beings.  
Desiring to attain happiness and eliminate suffering,  
We completely identify with an inferior place.

Hence, clinging to the self lies at the very root of taking birth in samsara.

As the Buddha himself taught, this can also be clearly demonstrated using logic. Just like seeing a colored rope and thinking it's a snake, clinging to a self where there is none is nothing but delusion, because just as there is no snake in the rope, there is not even the slightest trace of an "I" or "self" in the aggregates. To prove this to yourself, consider the physical body, as explained in the *Way of the Bodhisattva* with the passage that begins, "The teeth, hair, and nails are not a self..."; the internal process of cognition, which is referred to by the line, "Neither are the six forms of consciousness a self..."; and the various factors that occur within the mind. You will find that none of these are a self because these factors themselves are by nature manifold and impermanent.

The past and future minds are not selves, since they do not exist, yet neither is the mind that manifests in the present moment a self, due to the fact that it is momentary, impermanent, and unstable. Hence, since there is no self, clinging to the idea that there is one amounts to nothing more than a state of delusion. For this very reason, the wisdom that realizes the absence of self will be able to completely eradicate clinging to a self.

To take this even further, we can use the seven-fold reasoning of the chariot to analyze the relationship between the self and the aggregates. To begin, there is no self that exists apart from the aggregates, yet neither are these two the same. The self does not depend upon the aggregates, like juniper seeds resting in a bowl, nor do the aggregates depend upon the self. Since the self cannot be found, one of these does not belong to the other, like Devadatta and his possessions, nor are they essentially different, like Devadatta and his physical body. Finally, the self is not the shape or collection of the aggregates either. Hence, when you search for it in these seven ways, you will see that there is no self. Instead, what is actually occurring is a deluded frame of mind, in which one clings to the idea of a self where there is none, just like seeing a pile of stones off in the distance and thinking that it's a person or coming upon a colored piece of rope and seeing it as a snake...it's nothing more than that.

Concerning the mind that realizes selflessness and emptiness by definitively ascertaining the absence of an "I" or "self," Dharmakirti wrote:

Because it is in conflict with the view of emptiness  
The nature of emptiness is thoroughly established  
To be in conflict with every single shortcoming.

As shown here, clinging to a self lies at the root of all the afflictions. Since the realization of selflessness counteracts this clinging, as well as all the afflictions it generates, once you have familiarized yourself with selflessness over and over again the true nature of selflessness will eventually become a living reality.

## PHENOMENAL SELFLESSNESS

### EXAMINING CAUSES

The entire range of phenomena appear and manifest in three ways: as causes, as results, and as an essential nature. The first of these three can be analyzed using the reasoning of the vajra splinters. Since all phenomenal entities do not arise from any of the four

extremes—from themselves, from something else, from both, or from neither—causes are devoid of conceptual assignations. Furthermore, since all resultant phenomena can be found not to arise when analyzed in terms of their existence, nonexistence, arising, and cessation, results as well are devoid of conceptual assignations. Since the essence of phenomena is found to be unestablished when analyzed in terms of being neither singular nor multiple, this essence is clearly established to be emptiness. Finally, all causal, resultant, and essential phenomena are established as emptiness through the reasoning of great interdependence. This is alluded to in the line:

That which is empty and interdependently arisen  
Is synonymous on the path of the Middle Way.

If one takes the position, as the Samkhyas do, that the cause is the essential nature of the result, and that it is not feasible for a result to arise if it does not exist in the cause, one may respond as follows: If the cause is present as the essential nature of a result, then there is no need for the latter to arise. The reason for this, it is said, is that when the cause is present, it would already have become the essential nature of the result.

To this, some may respond by saying that when the cause is present the result is not yet manifest, and it then arises in a manifest form. In this way, the position here is that this manifestation does not exist initially and then arises at a later point in time. If one takes this position, however, it conflicts with one's previous statement that something that does not exist to begin with cannot feasibly arise.

If something needs to arise even though its own essential nature already exists, however, a seed would occur *ad infinitum* and there would never be a chance for a sprout to develop. If seed and sprout share the same essential nature, then it would also absurdly follow that when the sprout is present the brownish form of the seed would still be present as well. Alternately, it would have to follow that when the sprout is present, its green shape would not be present, as the seed is not present either. The reason, here, is that the sprout and seed are held to be the same.

If one then responds by saying that the sprout and the seed it arises from are different, then it would absurdly follow that darkness could arise from fire, because this is also a case of one thing arising from something "other" than itself.

"This does not follow," some may respond, "sprouts *do* arise from seeds, since the former arising from the latter actually manifests and seeds have the *potential* to produce the sprouts. What's more, that one of these can produce the other is the *very nature* of things.

These ideas are refuted as follows: one may say that things appear in this way because we have been under the influence of such deluded logic for a very long time. We cannot, however establish something as valid on the basis of its appearance alone. And with respect to the potential mentioned here, it is not possible for that which has arisen to possess the potential to produce something else, and that which has not arisen, in essence, also lacks such potential. Further, as for it being the "very nature," then it should be firmly based in reason, as selflessness is, [but since it is not], neither can it be said to be the very nature of these things.

There are other problems with this theory as well: when the sprout is present, there is no seed that has transformed into something else, nor is there a sprout that has

transformed into something else when the seed is present. Hence, it is mere verbiage to say that one thing has arisen from something else.

The valid cognition experienced by realized beings in a state of meditative equipoise cannot be refuted by the subjective perception of those with a worldly perspective. The scriptures explain:

The eyes, ears, and nose do not validly cognize,  
Nor do the tongue, the body, or the mind.  
If it were the case that these senses validly cognized,  
What would the path of realized beings do for anyone?

Another position is that things arise from both self and other. For instance, Maitreya is born from himself in the sense that he arises due to the life-force of his previous existence, and from another in that he is conceived from factors such as the semen and ovum of the parents he has in his present life. Therefore, one may say, things arise from both self and other.

To this one may respond as follows: If you can't get oil by squeezing one grain of sand, putting two or more together and doing the same thing won't produce any oil either. In the same way, if it does not make sense for either self or other to produce a result on its own, neither does it make sense for these two to produce a result in combination.

If one then thinks that things have no cause, then it would absurdly follow that for a farmer to be able to harvest crops in the fall, he or she would not have to go out and look for seeds to buy, plough the field, or do anything else. If things can occur without depending on a cause, it would absurdly follow that flower gardens could grow in the sky. Alternately, nothing at all would arise, just as there are no flowers in the sky. For all these reasons, if you examine causes you will see that there is no rational basis whatsoever underlying the idea that things truly exist.

## EXAMINING RESULTS

If a given result exists from the very beginning, then what need would it have for something that produces it, for its production would have already taken place. On the other hand, if one thinks that a given result does not exist at the outset, then it would be impossible to produce it, because a cause is an entity, and entities are incompatible with non-entities. To give an example, this is similar to the fact that one would never be able to make a rabbit horn a real thing, even were one to assemble millions upon millions of causes.

Well then, how do results appear from causes? If one realizes them to be empty, like dreams and illusions, their mere appearance will not bind one to samsara. Hence, mere appearances that are understood to be empty are not refuted here. The *Way of the Bodhisattva* explains:

Here, it is that which causes suffering,  
The idea that things truly exist, that is refuted.

Hence, it is the fact that results do not have even the slightest shred of true existence that brings about the absence of desire for results.

#### EXAMINING THE ESSENCE OF PHENOMENA

When you consider the essence of phenomena as well, you will see that they lack inherent existence and are emptiness. Whether you contemplate a vase, a chariot, or any other thing, all will be seen to not truly exist. There is no truly existent singular phenomena, nor are there truly existent composite phenomena. Concerning the former, there are no truly existent singular phenomena because vases are composite and can be broken down into a base, midsection, and so on; chariots can be broken down into wheels, axles and the like; and on and on. Furthermore, neither are phenomena truly existent and composite, because no truly existent singular entities can be found, and such entities would have to form basis for such collections. This logically follows because the bases for a collection of things are themselves singular entities.

When the true existence of both singular and composite phenomena has been refuted in this manner, that which pervades will have been refuted, and, hence, that which is pervaded as well. In this case, that which is pervaded is true existence, which is refuted in the same way that oak trees will be negated when trees in general are negated. By coming to a definitive conclusion in this manner, the essence of all phenomena will be proven to be emptiness.

As outlined above, all phenomena, in terms of cause, result, and essence, are emptiness and lack inherent existence, because all arise in an interdependent manner. This was stated in the sutras:

That which arises due to conditions does not arise,  
In the sense that no *existent thing* has arisen.  
That which depends on conditions is emptiness.

And by the glorious Chandrakirti with the passage that begins, “the objects witnessed in a dream...”

Results can even appear to be uncaused, as is the case when two things like a face and a clear mirror come together. In this case, the reflection that results from this meeting does manifest, but nevertheless does not exist. The same can be said about the horses, cattle, and other creatures that appear in our dreams. It is feasible for a given result to manifest when its causes and conditions have come together, even though it may not actually exist. Hence, if something may feasibly manifest, it is emptiness. Furthermore, since they are emptiness, appearances may manifest in a variety of ways. This is why it is definitively proven that being empty and interdependently arisen are mutually inclusive.

As alluded to by the great bodhisattva with the line, “...examples accepted by both,” whatever appears necessarily lacks true existence, and, therefore, is proven to be lacking inherent existence as well. Since there are no examples of a knowable object that truly exists, such an occurrence will never be found.

Therefore, all phenomenal entities arise in dependence, while non-entities are mere imputations that are made in a referential manner. Shantideva once wrote:

Without encountering an imaginary entity,  
Its associated non-entity cannot be apprehended.  
Therefore, given a false entity,  
Its non-entity as well is clearly false.

Hence, when one's son has died in a dream,  
The idea one entertains that he is no more  
Blocks the idea that he still lives,  
Yet this idea as well is a lie.

And the protector Nagarjuna taught:

“That which arises in dependence does not arise,”  
Thus the one with supreme true knowledge spoke.

In this way, no entity or non-entity can be proven to exist. This, in turn, puts to rest the entire range of elaborations concerning both existence and nonexistence. As it is said:<sup>3</sup>

When neither entity nor non-entity  
Remain before the mind,  
There is no position left to take,  
And it rests in non-conceptual peace.

As stated here, at this point one no longer identifies with or focuses upon any form of conceptual limitation, but instead settles without needing to refute or prove anything. This was taught by the great regent, beginning with the line, “Here, something that needs to be refuted...” As he points out, without engaging the mind by conceptually labeling or focusing on something, here one settles evenly and with one-pointed attention on the very essence of whatever manifests, without trying to prove, disprove, or identify anything. This will put to rest all the elaborations of the mind and its contents. Once one has witnessed the nature of reality itself, a nonconceptual state devoid of dualistic perception, it will be as taught in the *Unsurpassed Continuum*:

The inner identity of the dharmakaya  
Will be seen with the eye of wisdom.

And as alluded to in *Rahula's Praise of the Mother*, when it comes to the essence of the awareness of meditative equipoise, one sees nakedly and free from the conceptual mind, without needing to identify anything at all. This is the realization of the nature of the profound Great Middle Way.

These contemplative exercises will elicit a sense of certainty. When you then cultivate the wisdom that comes from meditating on the meaning you have found, a state of non-referential great compassion will arise towards all the beings who have yet to come to this same realization. This, in turn, will prompt a sense of genuine courage to

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<sup>3</sup> this is a famous quotation from the 9<sup>th</sup> chapter of the *Way of the Bodhisattva*.

arise, in which you will desire to bring all these beings to the state of great enlightenment. As the glorious Chandrakirti wrote:

This pledge cannot be proven by disproving non-dual wisdom.  
Hence, one must definitely engage non-dual wisdom alone.

As alluded to here, nonconceptual meditative absorption is the factor that causes the courageous mind of enlightenment, bodhicitta. Here one accesses this state automatically, and the relationship between this profound cause and result continues without interruption, like a wheel.

To sum up, in meditative equipoise what one beholds is free from all elaborations like space, while in post-meditation all appearances are seen to be unestablished like the moon's reflection in water. One should conclude by dedicating the merit to the welfare of illusory sentient beings. All this constitutes the approach to practice that contains a preparation, main practice, and conclusion.

*This was written in an accessible manner by a lowly old man named Gelek Chöpel [Khenchen Petsé Rinpoche]. May it bring virtue!*

*Translated by Karma Tsultrim Shönu [Cortland Dahl] under the direction of Khenpo Sherab Sangpo (spring, 2007).*