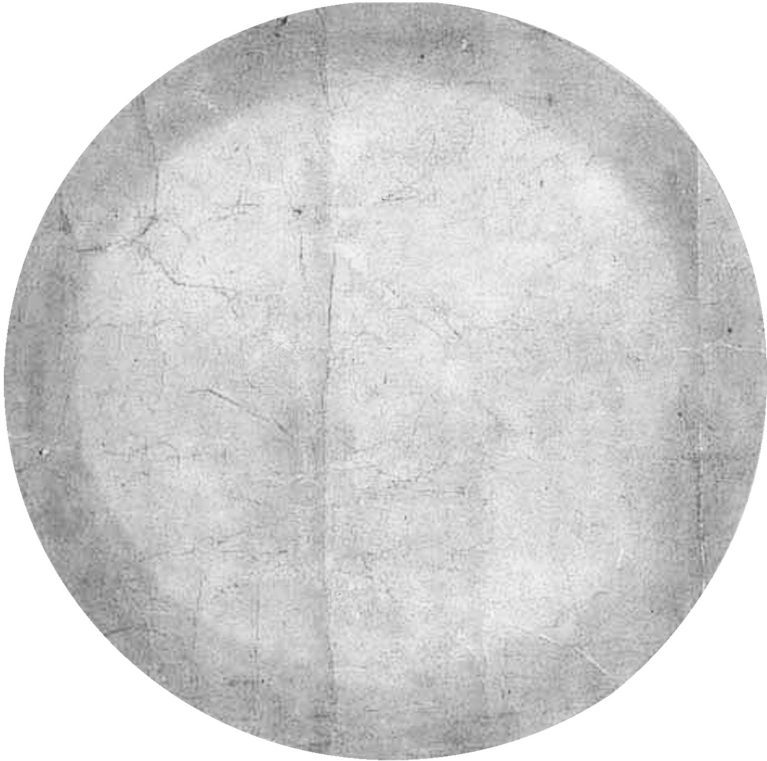


Emptiness

Panacea



Philosophy, Logic, Experience

WIM VAN DEN DUNGEN

Emptiness *Panacea*

Philosophy, Logic, and Experience

WIM VAN DEN DUNGEN

Emptiness Panacea

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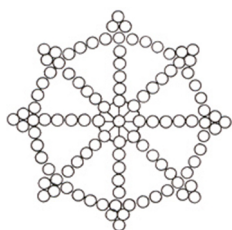
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dedicated to Pascal

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All of these practices were taught
By the Mighty One for the sake of wisdom.
Therefore, those who wish to pacify suffering
Should generate this wisdom.

Śāntideva : *A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, IX:1

For whom emptiness is possible,
Everything is possible.
For whom emptiness is not possible,
Nothing is possible.

Nāgārjuna : *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way*, XXIV:14

Preface

This book may be condensed into four words : ‘no substance, only process.’ When understood, quench the fire driving you to read it.

Emptiness (*śūnyatā*) is the heart of the Buddhayāna, the ‘vehicle’ (*yāna*) of the Buddha. *Śūnyatā* is the noun form of the adjective *śūnya*, meaning ‘void, zero, nothing and empty,’ from the root *śvi*, or ‘to swell.’ However, emptiness is not ‘nothing.’ Instead, it refers to the *absence* of something, to the fact an object has been negated. It is deemed *not* to be present and nowhere to be found. So, the ‘zero’ is not mathematical, as if emptiness would be nothingness, but stands for a second-order, pointing to what is *not* there amongst what is given. What is found wanting ? A particular common way of existence entertained by most of us ...

Subjectively, any enduring, settled sense of ‘I’ or ‘me’ is lacking. ‘I-am-ness’ (*asmitā*), giving rise to what Buddhist yogis call ‘self-love’ (*ātmasneha*), is the root of all possible ‘foes’ or mental and affective disturbances. When the base of the mind is turned (*āśraya-parāvṛtti*), a *liberated* state ensues. This mind no longer attends the aggregates (*skandhas*) as permanent but as impermanent ; not fixating or holding on to anything (the liberation of the Arhat). Objectively, emptiness refers to the absence of inherent existence, to the fact that no independent, self-existent, and permanent material can be found anywhere. The Bodhisattva may fully awake to this ultimate property of all existing things called ‘emptiness,’ thus entering *what is the case* (*tathatā*) or Buddhahood.

According to the Mahāyāna interpretation followed in this book, at Bodhi Gaya Siddhārtha Gautama of the Śākya clan wholly realized, without any sense of ‘I’ or ‘mine,’ the lack of inherent existence of all phenomena and entered *nirvāṇa* as Buddha Śākyamuni, the Awakened One. Not long after, his excellent *dharma* about selflessness (*anātman*) –because of its salvific effect– touched all walks of Indian life, moving beyond the social system (of castes). It appealed across social divisions, gave rise to a new monastic order, and articulated a rigorous analysis of selflessness distinct from the substantialist positions defended by several Brahmanical schools. After centuries of interaction with Brahmanical, Hindu, Jain, and other Indian traditions, Buddhism declined in India through a complex conjunction of institutional, political, economic, and military causes, including the destruction of major monasteries during Islamic invasions. Its teachings nevertheless continued to develop across Asia and, eventually, throughout the world.

In Theravāda, *anātman* denies a self-sufficient and fixed self, analyzing the person in terms of impermanent and conditioned processes. Mahāyāna extends the explicit analysis of emptiness to all phenomena, identifying the impossible mode of existence projected upon persons and things alike. The second development broadens the object of analysis ; it does not render the earlier realization philosophically negligible. In the West, Madhyamaka literature expounding universal emptiness is mostly based on Indo-Tibetan logic, epistemology, and Buddhology, on the potent tenet-approach, and the insistence Nāgārjuna's view is definitive, and so the best philosophical view (*prajñā*). Suppose Western-based epistemology, linguistics, neurophilosophy were used to explain text and practice ...

In Tibet, the absence of 'self,' subjective as well as objective, or self-emptiness, is the view of Tsongkhapa's Gelugpas ; '*rangtong*' (self-emptiness). Logic, epistemology, and reason are central to this tradition. Their highest conceptual achievement is a contrived or constructed realization of the proximate ultimate, not yet the direct realization of an Ārya. Such wisdom can interrupt reification with extraordinary precision, especially during Emptiness Meditation, but it does not by itself become the continuous nondual cognition in which appearance and emptiness arise together. This is the limit of conceptual wisdom, not evidence that the mind merely fools itself.

Yogis maintain a contrasting view, called '*shentong*' or other-emptiness. This outlook is held by prominent members of various Tibetan monastic orders, like the Nyingmapas, Kagyupas, and Jonangpas, adhering to *mahāmadhyamaka*, accepting the claim Nāgārjuna's view is definitive but introducing a fully enlightened Inner Buddha (*tathāgatagarbha*). To avoid sectarianism, the approach of the non-partisan *rimé*-movement is helpful. Rangtong offers the strongest philosophical analysis (*prajñā* as *sophia*), while Shentong offers a powerful yogic orientation toward direct, naked cognition (*jñāna* as *gnosis*) and mindfulness in every moment. When Shentong converts contemplative disclosure into an ontology, its philosophy weakens ; when Rangtong remains confined to conceptual analysis, its practice remains incomplete. The case that Prāsaṅgika is philosophically definitive and Shentong contemplatively directive is strong, although their relation is not finally settled. Within Shentong, recognition of the Inner Buddha is held to disclose *gnosis* and to make the irreversible ending of self-grasping possible. This is a contemplative claim, not a conclusion established by philosophical analysis alone.

This book gives body to my intent to help understand emptiness, so its *salvific power* may benefit as many as possible. Healing mind is related to the fact common Emptiness Meditation clears emotional and mental

afflictions, whereas ‘seeing’ emptiness is a nondual state of mind, fostering nondual perception, nondual thought, and nondual action. These aspects of the awake mind lack substance-obsession, heal the obscurations, and end the conflicts resulting from a lack of activities uprooting suffering. Awakening brings in compassion in every moment, doing what Buddhas do.

It was a daunting task to try to find Ariadne’s thread in a significant selection from the *corpus* of English texts on the subject published in the last 50 years by this vast assembly of Rinpoches, scholars, yogis, students and devotees of the five schools of Tibetan Buddhism.

I thank them from the bottom of my heart.

No doubt, this book is provisional and incomplete, and it bears the marks of the many limitations of my mind. I apologize for its mistakes and remain open to learning more.

I dedicate the merits of this effort to the Field of Merit. I pray that all sentient beings may benefit and recognize their Buddha Within and thus find *true* peace.

Wim van den Dungen
September 2017

Preface to the 2026 Edition

Emptiness Panacea was first published in 2017 and revised in 2020. The original Preface records the purpose and circumstances of that work, and I have retained it as part of the book's history. The present Preface has a narrower task : to explain why a thorough reworking became necessary in 2026.

The central intent of the book has not changed. It remains an attempt to understand emptiness rigorously and to bring that understanding into relation with contemplative practice and the cessation of suffering. The concise formula given in the original Preface, 'no substance, only process,' still expresses its orientation. What changed was the philosophical framework through which this orientation had been articulated. Several distinctions on which the earlier editions relied no longer represented my position accurately enough.

During the years following the revised edition, I completely reworked the three *Regulae* and wrote the two volumes of *Critical Metaphysics of Process*. The *Regulae* constitute normative philosophy, dealing respectively with the principles governing knowledge, aesthetic judgment, and ethical action. *Critical Metaphysics of Process* is descriptive metaphysics. It offers an arguable and corrigible account of actuality without claiming the testability proper to science. Normative philosophy precedes such metaphysics, for metaphysics cannot ground the principles it already uses when constructing and defending its claims. Although *Emptiness Panacea* is neither an extension of the *Regulae* nor an introduction to metaphysics, it draws upon epistemological and metaphysical distinctions developed in these works. Once these had been revised, the relevant parts of this book could not simply be left as they were. The Buddhist inquiry remained primary, but the instruments brought to that inquiry had to be corrected.

The most consequential correction concerned perception and sensation. In the earlier framework, empirical descriptions of sensory input and processing were too closely associated with perception. The reworked epistemology reserves *perception* for the *necessary* givenness presupposed by sensation. It does not describe what is given or how it is given. Sensory, spatial, temporal, qualitative, neurological, and physiological determinations belong to sensation and its empirical conditions, not to perception itself. Sensation is *interpreted* appearance. This distinction required substantial revision of chapter 3 and of later passages depending upon its terminology. It is extensively addressed in *Regulae I* (2025).

The account of scientific facts also had to be reworked. Facts cannot be treated as pieces of reality entering knowledge without interpretation. Neither can they be reduced to constructions produced by language, theory, or consensus. Scientific facts are articulated within a theoretical and observational framework while remaining constrained by what the investigator does not produce. Science tests and argues. Its propositions are answerable both to observation and experimentation and to critical discussion among participating subjects. Scientific knowledge may be valid without becoming absolute, final, or identical with reality-as-such.

This correction affected more than the explicit discussion of science. It required renewed vigilance wherever scientific findings, philosophical interpretations, and metaphysical claims approached one another. Empirical findings belong to science. Claims about the conditions making knowledge possible belong to normative epistemology. Totalizing accounts of actuality belong to immanent metaphysics. Direct nondual cognition cannot be converted into any of these. The revised edition distinguishes these registers more consistently and withdraws formulations in which scientific vocabulary carried philosophical or metaphysical implications it could not establish. The scientific material itself also required reconsideration. Scientific knowledge changes, and information incorporated into an earlier edition may later prove incomplete, outdated, or too dependent upon a particular explanatory model. Neurological and physiological descriptions were reviewed in light of the revised distinction between perception, sensory processing, and sensation. Claims extending beyond the available evidence were removed, restricted, or identified as speculative. This was necessary not merely to modernize the book, but to prevent an empirical description from being made to answer a philosophical question outside its proper domain.

The reworking of *Critical Metaphysics of Process* produced another set of consequences. Its account of matter, information, and consciousness as irreducible but interdependent operators required corresponding changes wherever *Emptiness Panacea* addressed the body/mind problem, process, consciousness, or the relation between scientific and metaphysical explanation. These revisions do not make the Buddhist argument dependent upon my metaphysics. No metaphysical construction proves emptiness, and the process framework is itself subject to ultimate analysis. Its relevance lies in providing a more coherent descriptive background than the one presupposed in the earlier editions. The result is not a new book placed beneath an old title. Its four-Part architecture remains, as does the movement from the philosophy of emptiness through ultimate logic and contemplative cultivation to the inquiry into other-emptiness. The Introduction explains that architecture and presents the central argument.

There is no need to repeat either here. The Parts should be read cumulatively, because later discussions presuppose distinctions established earlier, but they retain their different purposes and methods.

Nor has the revision been used to erase the history of the work. A book written across different periods inevitably preserves something of those periods : their questions, emphases, limitations, and vocabulary. Revision should correct what has become untenable without pretending that the work emerged all at once in its final form. The earlier editions belonged to the development of the inquiry. This edition incorporates what subsequent philosophical work made clearer while preserving the Buddhist and contemplative purpose for which the book was written.

That purpose remains soteriological.

Philosophical precision matters here because an incorrectly identified object of negation distorts both thought and practice. Scientific accuracy matters because false or exaggerated empirical claims weaken the conventional ground from which the inquiry begins. Metaphysical restraint matters because emptiness must not be transformed into another supposedly self-existing foundation. Yet none of these corrections replaces practice. The written argument can clarify, distinguish, and remove avoidable confusion. What the mind does with that clarification remains decisive. This reworked edition is still provisional.

Historical and doctrinal interpretations remain open to correction. Scientific accounts will continue to change. Philosophical formulations can be sharpened, and contemplative claims must remain answerable to experience and their enduring fruits. The revision does not remove these limitations. It acknowledges them more explicitly and tries to prevent them from being concealed by an appearance of finality.

I remain grateful to the scholars, translators, teachers, yogis, and practitioners whose work made this inquiry possible. Whatever is sound in these pages depends upon a long transmission of study, reflection, practice, and debate. The remaining errors are mine. May this reworked edition help remove confusion without damaging what conventionally functions, deepen inquiry without turning it into scholastic accumulation, and direct understanding toward the benefit of all sentient beings.

Wim van den Dungen
September 2026

For the emptiness of one thing
Is the emptiness of everything.

Āryadeva : Four Hundred Verses, 8:16



Fig. 1 *Buddha Śākyamuni*

OM MUNI MUNI MAHĀMUNI ŚĀKYAMUNI SVĀHĀ

Introduction

Over two and a half millennia ago, Indian thought was a *mélange* of Brahmanical, Vedic, and non-Vedic renunciant teachings. These traditions interacted, contested one another, and shared some concepts without necessarily deriving from a single source. Philosophical inquiry addressed, among other questions, how persons, things, and events existed and how knowledge of them served liberation. Have they something in common ? Or something they all share ? What is the ultimate reality of how they exist ? Answers (or views) served the path towards the fruit of salvation, the liberation (*mokṣa*) from cyclic existence (*saṃsāra*).

In several respects, the Buddha's teachings employed concepts and practices circulating among Brahmanical and non-Vedic renunciant communities, while decisively revising others. Brahmanism represented the orthodox authority of the Vedas, whereas various religious groups arose in relation to and as a reaction against Vedic thought. Around 700 BCE, if not earlier, Brahmins, Jains, non-Vedic renunciants, and a variety of sects debated karmic law, cyclic existence, liberation, ethical discipline, and yogic practice, exchanging concepts and methods across their differences. The Buddhadharma emerged within this developing intellectual and contemplative field. What was its outstanding feature ?

Buddha Śākyamuni's message is simple : we all search for happiness and fail to find it because we are looking for it in the wrong way. To end this defect, an understanding of the nature of reality different than the habitual one is called for.

Early Buddhist sources portray several competing positions through the contrast between annihilationist and eternalist extremes,¹ although the historical field contained more varied and internally differentiated views. Against the positions targeted by this contrast, the Buddha's teaching advances a Middle Way.

Avoiding the extremes of luxury and abject mortification, Buddha proposed a Middle Way, later reformulated as steering away from both a self-sufficient ultimate reality (eternalism) and the total absence of common ground (annihilationism). The Middle Way is an expedient to enlightenment Buddha realized *after* his life as a prince, traditional yogi, and ascetic ! His wisdom is not speculative. The need to understand *how reality ultimately exists* drives his soteriology. Without this realization, our ignorance endures. If so, then delusion, craving, and hatred cannot be eradicated, and happiness remains elusive. Without the wisdom realizing the ultimate nature of what exists, freedom is impossible.

It all depends on eliminating the reification of self and others. All sentient beings, born of delusion and natural law (*dharma* and *karma*), are caught up in cyclic existence. Without insight into how reality truly exists, we are powerless to break away from this vicious farce. Buddha's worldview is soteriological, not merely an understanding of the world. He seeks to *deliver* all sentient beings, *irreversibly* ending their suffering (*duḥkha*). This outlook he shares with other Indian spiritual teachers, but the way he goes about doing it is wholly different and unorthodox (*nāstika*). The cause of our ignorance is an ongoing *misapprehension*, misconceiving the correct way things exist. Instinctively and intellectually, we are *trapped* in an ignorance *ascribing existence to something which has none*. We are mostly not even aware of this misknowledge.

Buddha was revolutionary when he affirmed sentient beings to have 'no-self' (*anātman*), i.e., that they lacked fixed, permanent, unchanging, separate, and uncaused existence. In the Indian context, this directly challenged those Brahmanical, Sāṃkhya, and Yoga teachings that upheld a transcendent and eternal self-principle whose realization or isolation in aloneness (*kaivalyam*) brought liberation. Realizing this soul or self (*ātman*), this 'great man' (*puruṣa*), was held by these traditions to free it from the chains of cyclic existence and its ongoing suffering. The Buddhist analysis rejected both the substantial self and liberation as aloneness.

The absence of inherent existence is the pivotal property on which all of *saṃsāra* hinges. Failing to see this, is the cause of it all. From this basic mental obscuration, two branches spring : on the one hand, craving, exaggerated attachment or attraction, and, on the other, hatred, excessive aversion, or rejection. These two *reactive* tendencies of the mind, triggering affirmation and negation, acceptance and denial, pulling in and driving out, give birth to a vast array of displeasure.

"All desire, hatred, enmity, jealousy, and so forth are seen as relying on a false estimation of the nature of oneself, other persons, and other phenomena ; therefore, *penetration of reality is at the heart of the practice of purification* in that realization of the actual nature of things serves to undermine all afflictive emotions. The aim is to emerge as a source of help and happiness for other beings, who are viewed as close friends wandering in a prison of cyclic repetition of birth, aging, sickness and death."

Hopkins, *Emptiness Yoga*, 1995, p. 37, my italics.

The Eightfold Path leading to the cessation of suffering begins with the Right View. So to end our predicament, we have to *know reality the best way we rationally can*. This Right View has, throughout the millennia,

been viewed in many different and conflicting ways, giving rise to specific logic and philosophy. The numerous disputes and its complex literature hindered a clean-cut exposition of the heart of the Buddhadharma.

This book supports the idea that the best philosophical, and therefore conceptual, explanation of the Right View is given by the Middle Way School (Madhyamaka), founded by Nāgārjuna (ca. 150 – 250 CE). In his *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way*, he laid the ground for Madhyamaka accounts of conventional and ultimate reality (Siderits & Katsura, 2013). In this and other texts, he rejects *svabhāva* understood as independent, inherent, or substantial existence.

Emptiness is a lack of independent, inherent, essential, or substantial existence. By vacating our hallucination (for a self-powered substance cannot be found), universal interdependence remains. Some wrongly accused Nāgārjuna of nihilism, claiming he identified emptiness or absence of inherent existence with non-existence (nihilism). But note that vacating substance unconceals process, the dependent origination of all that exists. Emptiness is not nothingness or non-existence. The less substance-obsession is active, the clearer the interdependent network of events, and the better-equipped one is to benefit (oneself and others). Without the *overlay* of non-existent delusions, one may comprehend how dependent-arising, the law of existence, organizes the universal interconnectedness between all possible phenomena, moves the sea of interexistent actual occasions, each being ‘as it is’ (*yathā-bhūta*).

“The declarations that Nāgārjuna has no views, no thesis or position certainly sound like assertions that he knows nothing at all about how things actually are. Understood in this way, emptiness would be a remedy (*niḥsaraṇam*) for views about how things actually are. Emptiness would mean, then, that Nāgārjuna states that *he has no knowledge of entities in their real nature*. Emptiness would be the emptiness of all knowledge-claims concerning how things really are.”

Burton, *Emptiness Appraised*, 1999, p. 31, my italics.

To bring this intention to fruition, contrary to so many great Eastern teachers who extensively and profoundly taught on emptiness in accord with traditional procedures², strict Western nominalism (Ockham, Kant, Wittgenstein, Whitehead, and criticism at large)³ and neurophilosophy⁴ are made part of the present attempt at understanding the ultimate nature of phenomena. It happens in terms of the crucial points of the Middle Way School approach and conforms to contemporary epistemology and general science.

An attempt is made to harmonize transcendental logic and critical epistemology (cf. *Regulae I*, 2025) with the decisive teachings regarding how to develop the wisdom realizing the ultimate nature of what exists, namely emptiness. This wisdom is twofold : conceptual (*vikalpa*) and nondual (*nirvikalpa*). While yogic practice (Yogācāra) is key and so integrated, the logic used is derived from Middle Way philosophy in general, and Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka, the Critical Middle Way, in particular.

Emptiness does not mean non-existence.⁵ The wisdom *conceptually* realizing emptiness (*prajñā*) understands that all phenomena lack permanent, essential properties. When the cognitive error, causing the superimposition of permanency on what is impermanent, ceases, dependent origination, in other words, the universal interconnectedness of all existents dawns ; this is interexistence fully understood.

When the iron bird flies, and horses run on wheels, the Tibetan people will be scattered like ants across the world, and the Dharma will come to the land of the Red Man. – *attributed to Padmasaṃbhava*

Where can things eternally fixed in their being be found ? With *anātman*, Buddha Śākyamuni merely vacates substantial existence, i.e., existence from one's own side (*svarūpa-siddhi*), with own-nature, (*svabhāva*) or self-subsisting self (*ātman*, *puruṣa*) ; an existence by way of one's own character (*svalakṣaṇa-siddhi*). Under ultimate analysis, such existence cannot be found. Even to perfect yogis, it is non-existent. That is what emptiness is all about. All possible things, whatever they are called and whatever they do, are not substance-based, but process-based. It is that simple.

Because phenomena are empty, they can only exist as relations ; they are other-powered. Emptiness is the motor of process, of creative advance in togetherness. The opposite view, attributing substantial form, precludes change, transformation, and relation.

When phenomena are not reified, their conventional and ultimate properties appear together, and the dependent origination of their names and functions is entirely understood (*prajñāpāramitā*). Phenomena can only perfectly interconnect if they are empty, i.e., possess nothing from their own side. To connect, interaction, togetherness, and interpenetration

must be possible. What is substantial is eternal. Fixed, it cannot change. Devoid of impermanence, it cannot transform into anything else.

Emptiness is not a noun, but an adjective, a *property* of every phenomenon. When realized by reason, the apprehended object, the apprehended knowledge, and the apprehender are cognized as impermanent, i.e., changing from moment to moment. It precisely happens because they are in no way fixed or eternalized, totally devoid of substantial form, empty of self. This momentary simultaneity of appearance and its emptiness is the *proximate* ultimate, for still mediated by the generic idea of emptiness. Logic and philosophy, bound to concepts (*vikalpa*), can do no more. Emptiness is also the *direct experience* or so-called ‘direct perception’ of the yogis, recognizing the supramundane properties of Bodhi-mind, the awake mind, affirming it to be empty of everything other than itself ; just existing. Of this ‘seeing emptiness’ (*jñāna*), nothing can be said (*nirvikalpa*).

During the first dissemination of Buddhism in Tibet, beginning in the eighth century CE, Indian scriptures and tantric cycles were translated and transmitted on a large scale. The traditions later designated as the Old Translation School (Tib. *snga 'gyur*) organized these materials through a nine-vehicle classification. Tibetan translations consequently preserved many Indian Buddhist works whose Sanskrit originals were later lost.

During the renewed transmission from the late tenth and eleventh centuries onward, the New Translation traditions (Tib. *gsar ma*) established additional textual, contemplative, and monastic lineages. These institutions endured through substantial political changes, but they were profoundly disrupted in the twentieth century, especially after 1959 and the subsequent Tibetan diaspora. Since then, the Dharma has been propagated on all continents. Monasteries were built, and Tibetan Buddhist teachings propagated. The time has come to understand the teachings from a Western perspective. Tibetan scholasticism integrated the early Buddhist schools, as well as Sūtra and Tantra (Vajrayāna). It adopted its specific categories, like *prāsaṅgika* versus *svātantrika*, Rangtong versus Shentong, etc. Nyingma, Kagyu, Sakya, Jonang, and Gelug schools each profess specific practices, both in terms of study, reflection, and meditation.⁶

In terms of philosophy, the conceptual view on emptiness given by Nāgārjuna and his Middle Way Consequence School, the so-called Prāsaṅgika-Madhyamaka, known in Tibet as Rangtong, ‘self-emptiness,’ is evidently the best. However, in terms of meditative experience, the view of the Great Middle Way School (Shentong, ‘other-emptiness’ or

Mahāmadhyamaka) is not lost out of sight. The yogis walk the path of devotion and *direct experience* and are no longer preoccupied with preliminaries and the dereification of conceptual operations. Here, our focus lies in understanding the Right View.

- Nāgārjuna (ca. 150 – 250 CE) : *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way), *Vigrahavyāvartanī* (Dispeller of Disputes) and *Śūnyatāsaptatikārikānāma* (Seventy Stanzas on Emptiness) ;
- Āryadeva (ca. second – third century CE) : *Catuḥśataka* (Four Hundred Stanzas) ;
- Candrakīrti (ca. 600 – 650) : *Madhyamakāvatāra* (Entering the Middle Way) ;
- Śāntideva (8th CE) : *Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra* (A Guide to the Way of Life of the Bodhisattva) ;
- Atiśa (982 – 1054) : *Satyadvayāvatāra* (Intro to the Two Truths) ;
- Tsongkhapa (1357 – 1419) : *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment, The Ocean of Reasoning, The Essence of True Eloquence, Praise for Dependent Relativity and Illumination of Thought* ;
- Wangchuk Dorje (1556 – 1603) : *Feast for the Fortunate*.

Je Tsongkhapa (1357 – 1419), or ‘Man from the Onion Valley,’ was a renowned Tibetan Buddhist spiritual reformer, scholar, yogi, and tantric. Taking layman’s vows at the age of three, he was ordained as ‘Lobsang Drakpa’ (*‘Sumati Kīrti’* or ‘Perceptive Mind’) but called ‘Je Rinpoche.’ He was said to be a manifestation of Mañjuśrī. Founder of the doctrinal and influential Gelug school, he drew his direct inspiration from the Kadam school, founded by Atiśa’s disciple Dromtönpa (1005 – 1064) on the basis of Atiśa’s (982 – 1054) teaching, as well as from the Sakya school. He also had Dzogchen teachers.

“After I pass away,
And my pure doctrine is absent,
You will appear as an ordinary being,
Performing the deeds of a Buddha,
And establishing the Joyful Land,
The Great Protector,
In the Land of the Snows.”

Mañjuśrī-mūla-tantra

Based on Tsongkhapa’s teachings, his ‘Yellow Hats’ of the Gelug School have two outstanding characteristics, namely an emphasis on the moral code of discipline and the unity of the paths of Sūtra and Tantra. When he was born in Amdo (northeast Tibet), the grand final compilation of the

Canon of Tibetan Buddhism (Kangyur or Translated Words and Tengyur or Translated Treatises) had just been finished by Būstōn (1290 – 1364). Tsongkhapa worked through these teachings thoroughly.

His work fills eighteen volumes, used as textbooks by succeeding generations. Mastery resulted from (a) the study of the Buddhist teachings (through hearing and reading), (b) their critical, reflective examination, and (c) their meditative realization.

The significant results of this systematic and comprehensive organization of the Buddhādharma (comparable to the *Summa Theologica* of Thomas Aquinas) were presented in the *Lamrim Chenmo (Great Discourse on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment)* and the *Ngagrim Chenmo (Great Discourse on Secret Mantra)*. The influence of these two works, both available in English, was and is enormous, decisive, and lasting. The great monasteries of Tibet, such as Sera, Ganden, and Drepung, saw the light because of him. In 1409, Tsongkhapa also initiated the Great Prayer Festival (*Monlam Chenmo*).

As a Buddhist scholar, Tsongkhapa applied formal logic to the system of the Middle Way founded by Nāgārjuna, *in casu* the Prāsaṅgika-Madhyamaka school, and was, therefore, a skillful teacher of emptiness. His interpretation is here called ‘critical’ Madhyamaka, for its central preoccupations are (a) drawing the line between proper and improper objects of negation defining emptiness and (b) doing so without rejecting conventionality and the need for compassionate (virtuous) action. Tradition is not the ultimate authority but supportive. The final arbiter is reason, in particular, the coherence of the structure of the itinerary of the spiritual path (Tib. *lamrim*). Conceptual thought is not rejected but integrated.

In Gelug practice, eliminating the sense of inherent existence or own-form (*svabhāva*) or self, is the central cognitive task on the path to awakening, the way to the fruit. The Right View is the absolute absence of inherent existence. The body of practices leading up to the realization of this view is the path. The fruit is the direct experience of the Right View in the mind of a Buddha. Wisdom is three-fold.

- The first level involves ‘worldly’ wisdom, referring to a supreme form of conventional truth. It is not salvific (does not cease suffering).
- The second level is the wisdom realizing emptiness by way of concepts, i.e., the best possible rational understanding (*prajñā*). It *approximates* the *direct experience* of emptiness, and because it is not immediate, it is

contrived, fabricated, and somewhat artificial but does end self-cherishing and *nearly* halts all acquired, intellectual grasping at inherent existence.

• The third and final level of wisdom is the direct ‘seeing’ of emptiness, i.e., the nondual *yogic experience* of the absence of inherent existence. The latter involves *special* knowledge (*gnosis*), intuition, and exceptional yogic perception. The latter is *jñāna* which, when trained on the Path of Meditation, leads up to Buddhahood.

Prajñā is knowledge (*jñā*) prefixed by *pra-*, cognate to ‘pro-’ in English, found in loanwords from Latin, and indicative of ‘forward movement,’ ‘moving towards.’ It is practical knowledge facilitating the concrete, effectual breakdown of the obscurations (affective and mental), and represents the movement from ignorance to understanding emptiness.

In the Buddhadharma, *prajñā* refers to four types of activities.

1. Analytical scrutiny : focusing on an object and breaking it logically down into functions ;
2. Establishing, validating and using valid ways of knowledge : the rules of logic and epistemology are at hand, demarcating valid from invalid knowledge or unacceptable claims ;
3. Clear and efficacious articulation and understanding of the view of the Buddhadharma. It is not just a perspective or imposition of limits in terms of a specific object, but how one is orientated to and has comprehension of the world ;
4. Clear and penetrating insight : this insight into the ultimate nature of an object is the best possible conceptual insight. It is an understanding facilitating any activity ; the aim of Madhyamaka.

This best possible knowledge is a conceptual, rational type of precise understanding. It is a ‘know-how,’ for this knowledge has meaning only if it can be demonstrated. This wisdom is rational in the sense that it always calls for concepts and reason. Hence, *prajñā* does not point to wisdom ‘seeing’ emptiness, but to wisdom realizing emptiness in a contrived, indirect, approximate way. Solely *jñāna* has *direct* access to the absolute, *prajñā* remains indirect, conventional, and relative. It is the basis for establishing Buddhist logic and philosophy (the most excellent conventional truth possible), while *jñāna* is the foundation for all direct, gnostic experiences of the ultimate. The first is philosophical and partly salvific ; the latter is yogic and leads to Buddhahood. So, *prajñā* is a means for acquiring ultimate understanding, rather than the end-product itself (*jñāna*). If the fruit, the end of the path, is called *jñāna*, then the fruit itself, awakening, when savored, is *prajñā-jñāna*.

A consciousness paying attention to wisdom (as conceptual *prajñā* or non-conceptual *jñāna*) is a supreme virtuous phenomenon and heals all difficulties (is a *panacea*). Once fully realized (as *jñāna* on the highest levels of Bodhisattva training), there is no longer any need for the path. No More Learning and Buddhahood is at hand. The approach of Tsongkhapa is outstandingly balanced. His criticism reminds of Kant, who also tries to bring critical truth and goodness together. Defining emptiness as an absolute lack of substantiality, absence of own-form, want of essence (Gr. *eidos*), or the non-existence of substance (Gr. *ousia*, Lat. *substantia*), Tsongkhapa, reminding us of Candrakīrti, can find *dependent origination* and so *compassion*. Conventional truth, valid or invalid, is always mistaken, for it conceals ultimate truth.

Emptiness is the ultimate property of any phenomenon. If conventionality has some validity, then virtue is possible. In Bodhi-mind, all events remain empty, even while the interdependent fullness of conventionality rises. The heart of emptiness is *togetherness*. And to be together, one has to be empty of separate existence. For specific crucial topics, like the status of conventionality (the seeming, relative world) or the state of existence of a Buddha, the view of the above authors, in particular, the Gelug approach, will be mainly contrasted with :

- the ‘idealist’ Madhyamaka of Gorampa (1429 – 1489), assimilating elements from the Mind-Only School, the so-called ‘Yogācāra-Madhyamaka’ and
- the other-emptiness view (Shentong) of the *Mountain Doctrine* of Dolpopa (1292 – 1361) and *The Essence of Other-Emptiness* and *Twenty-one Differences Regarding the Profound Meaning of Tāranātha* (1576 – 1634).

Yogācāra-Madhyamaka focuses on the ultimate truth. It claims there is only ‘One Truth,’ thereby downgrading conventional truth. An ontological rift exists between, on the one hand, the saṃsāric world, contaminated, compounded and conventional, and, on the other hand, the nirvāṇic realm of the primordially pure and luminously aware. Only the latter is deemed to be true. Conventional truth must, therefore, be *invalid*, demoting the necessity of mundane virtue and the cultivation of compassion to attain Buddhahood. A conventional truth does not exist.

“... ultimate knowledge is not an object of knowledge in the sense that it can become known to its cognizing consciousness. It is simply an utter absence of anything empirical.”

Thakchoe, *The Two Truths Debate*, 2007, p. 120.

Shentong's focus on the Inner Buddha is based on yogic perceivers and the training of the nondual jñānic mind. The latter is non-conceptual, whereas Rangtong (Tibetan Prāsaṅgika) offers the best of the rational mind. When Shentong develops its view using conceptual elaboration, contradictions are unavoidable, while the definitive *prāsaṅgika* view is deemed superseded. However, what can be said about the nondual mind and how ?

Prāsaṅgikas do not posit a fully awakened Buddha Within. They ask : What mind is Bodhi-mind ? To these rationalists, Buddha-nature is merely the self-emptiness of the mind. Being foremost epistemological, Rangtong understands the ultimate truth to exist conventionally (pansacralism). Both truths operate the same object but yield different knowledge. Explaining dependent-arising and compassion both reinforce each other. Because nothing substantially exists, all things may transform into other things, backing impermanence and so ongoing universal change. While conventional reality conceals the ultimate, always appearing different than how things ultimately are, this functional illusion does not invalidate conventional truth as such and allows for valid conventional truths insofar as conventional reality goes. Compassion is the best conventional method to end self-cherishing and prepare the mind to end substance-obsession, no longer superimposing something eternal on the transient. The ultimate and eternal are to be found in the relative and temporal. Without compassion, the mind is never calm, pliant, and supple enough to do extensive meditations on emptiness. Emotional afflictions need to be silenced before one can probe reality. This book has four parts.

Part I has the *philosophy of emptiness*, approached by the didactical device of the Three Turnings invented by the Early Yogācāra. With the Second Turning, after foundational teachings and practices bear fruit, emptiness and compassion enter stage.

Chapter 1 advances the specifics of the *dharma* and the *yāna* of the Buddha. What separates the Buddhadharma from other points of view (*darśanas*) ? How did this core give rise to vehicles of practice ?

In Chapter 2, the First Turning lays down the foundations : the Four Noble Truths, the Two Truths, and the Eightfold Path, the training of ethics, meditation, and wisdom.

In Chapters 3 to 6, a neuro-philosophical epistemology is sketched, integrating *dharmic* epistemology with new information drawn from Western criticism, genetic epistemology, and neurology.

Chapters 7 and 8 present the Second Turning. Compassion is necessary to make the mind calm and supple, ready to investigate reality. Next, the *prāsaṅgika* view on emptiness is elaborated.

Part II deals with the *logic of emptiness*, or ultimate logic, and repeats what has been covered in terms of the Consequentialist view, but formalizes this so the heart of the matter may become evident. It also reveals the preconditions of the *prāsaṅgika* view, namely an implicit acceptance of the three axioms of classical formal logic : identity, non-contradiction, and excluded third. A new formal approach is made known, one identifying the correct object of negation and the consequences of the six exhaustive instantiations of existence. By formalizing the issue at hand, the argument becomes more streamlined.

In these chapters, ultimate analysis is formalized, and this alternative way to realize self-emptiness of persons and others is put forward, involving a set of six instantiations (or set of possible phenomena), covering all possible existence, contaminated (*saṃsāra*) or uncontaminated (*nirvāṇa*) and the logic ruling each. The crucial logical difference lies between the actualizing and the essentializing quantor. The former merely *posits an object* using name and function, while the latter, for no good reasons, *adds* substantial existence.

Part III studies how to meditate on emptiness, bringing the *experience of emptiness* to the fore. It is made clear that study and reflection do not suffice. Meditation is paramount. Common and uncommon Analytical Meditations, Insight Meditation and Emptiness Meditation are discerned, as well as the mind of superior seeing. The result is the realization of the *proximate ultimate*, the best intellectual apprehension (*prajñā*) of the emptiness of sensate and mental objects under scrutiny during Emptiness Meditation. Tools are given to deepen the Right View. This by contrasting the *prāsaṅgika* with Great Exposition, Sūtra, Mind-Only, and variations on the Middle Way theme (Autonomists and Other-Emptiness).

Part IV investigates the Third Turning, in particular other-emptiness and *innermost awareness*, how to harmonize what yogic perceivers evidence as uninterrupted, non-conceptual intuition (*jñāna* or *gnosis*), with what the best, interrupted conceptual mind understands (*prajñā* or *sophia*). Other-emptiness, Buddha-nature, the Jonangpas, the status of yogic perceivers, Mahāmudrā, and Dzogchen, are briefly discussed. It is crucial to integrate the path of the scholar, training in the view, with the path of the yogi, meditating on the nature of mind. Hence, in a non-partisan mode, self-emptiness and other-emptiness need to be integrated. Such a style depends on blissful calmness, penetrating insight, and whether the meditator recognizes his or her ‘original face.’ In the final chapter, emptiness is seen as the best possible medicine, a universal cure or *panacea*, a sovereign remedy allowing the mind to heal and end suffering and its causes.



Fig. 2 Protector Mañjuśrī

The Buddha of the Wisdom of all the Buddhas.

OM ĀḤ RA PA TZA NA DHĪḤ