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Vasubandhu's *Trisvabhāvanirdeśa* (*Treatise on the Three Natures*)

Jay L. Garfield

The *Trisvabhāvanirdeśa* (*Rang bzhin gsum nges par bstan pa*) is one of Vasubandhu's short treatises (the others being the *Treatise in Twenty Stanzas* [*Viṃsatikā*] and the *Treatise in Thirty Stanzas* [*Triṃśikākirikā*]) expounding his Cittamātra, or mind-only philosophy. Vasubandhu and his older brother Asaṅga are regarded as the founders and principal exponents of this Buddhist idealist school, which developed in the fourth or fifth century C.E. as the major philosophical rival within the Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition to the older Madhyamaka tradition. The latter school, founded by Nāgārjuna, urges the emptiness—the lack of essence or substantial, independent reality—of all things, including both external phenomena and mind. Vasubandhu, however, reinterprets the emptiness of the object as being its lack of *external* reality, and its purely mind-dependent, or ideal, status. At the same time, however, he argues that the foundational mind is nonempty since it truly exists as the substratum of the apparent reality represented in our experience. The position is hence a kind of idealism akin to, but different in important ways from, the idealisms defended by such Western philosophers as Berkeley, Kant, and Schopenhauer.

The text introduces the fundamental doctrine of Buddhist idealism, and clarifies in remarkably short compass its relations to the other principal doctrines of that school—that all external appearances are merely ideal and originate from potentials for experience carried in the mind. The central topic of the text is the exposition of how this view entails the cittamātra theory of the three natures—the view that every object of experience is characterized by

three distinct but interdependent natures. Vasubandhu's idealism is distinctive in its insistence that a coherent idealism requires the positing of these three natures—the *parikalpita* or imagined nature, the *paratantra* or dependent nature, and the *pariniṣpanna* or consummate nature—and in its subtle analysis of the complex relations between the natures themselves, involving the thesis of their surface diversity but deep unity.

The translation into English of the terms denoting the three natures is no straightforward matter. Each denotes a *nature* (Tib.: *rang bzhin,* Skt.: *svabhāva*). But each of the three qualifiers added to this term to denote one of the three natures creates a subtly ambiguous compound, and plays on this ambiguity form part of the structure of Vasubandhu's ingenious verse treatise. On the one hand, each characterizes the nature itself—part of what it is to be a phenomenon. On the other hand, each characterizes the relation of the subject to the phenomenon, or the character of the subjectivity that constitutes the representation of the phenomenon. The text is hence simultaneously an essay in ontology and in phenomenology. As far as Vasubandhu is concerned, what it is to be a *phenomenon* is to be an *object* of a mind, and this treatise is an exploration of what it is to be an object so conceived. So questions about subjectivity and questions concerning the ontology of the object are closely intertwined.

"Imagined" translates the Tibetan *kun brtags* or Sanskrit *parikalpita.* These terms connote *construction* by the mind more than they do nonexistence—hallucination rather than fiction. But this simile can be misleading. To be imagined in this sense is not to be hallucinatory as opposed to being real—it is to be constructed as an object by the operation of the mind. "Other-dependent" translates *gzhan gyi dbang* or *paratantra.* Something that is other-dependent in this sense exists only in and through dependence on another thing. In this case, the emphasis will be that phenomena exist in dependence on the mind and its processes.

I use "consummate" to translate *yongs.su grub pa* or *pariniṣpanna.* This is the most difficult of these three terms to translate. Others have used "perfect," "perfected," "thoroughly established," "thoroughly existent," "completed," and "ultimate."[1] Each of these choices has merit, and the variety of options illustrates the range of associations the term has in Tibetan or Sanskrit. When affixed to "nature," it connotes on the objective side the nature an object has when it is thoroughly understood. On the subjective side, it connotes the nature apparent to one who is fully accomplished intellectually and meditatively. It represents the highest and most complete understanding of a phenomenon.

There is a grammatical feature of the Sanskrit terms that deserves mention as well. *Parikalpita* and *pariniṣpanna* are each past participles, whereas

1. Kochumuttom (1982), Thurman (1984), Wood (1991), John Powers (*Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism* [Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 1995]), Anacker (1984), Nagao, G. (1991), and Cabezon (1992), respectively.

paratantra is nominal. *Paratantra-svabhāva,* the dependent nature, hence has a special place in the trio as a kind of basis of the other two. The central doctrine of Buddhist ontology is that all phenomena are dependently arisen. The dependent nature captures this fact. It hence has a claim to a *kind* of primacy or ultimate status. Imagination, though, is something that is *done.* The imagined nature that we ordinarily experience is a superimposition on the dependent nature. When we imagine things, we take them to be objects distinct from, or dually related to, our own subjectivity; to exist independently, and externally. Consummating our understanding is also something that is *done.* When we achieve consummate knowledge, we stop imagining, and experience the dependent nature as it is, empty of the duality, independence, and externality we once imagined it to have. The consummate nature of things is the fact that they are not as they are imagined to be.

Things appear to us as independently existent. But the objects of our experience, as we experience them, exist only in dependence on our minds. Without our subjectivity, there can be no objects. But given their actual mind-dependent status, of which we can be aware through careful philosophical reflection or through extensive meditative accomplishment, we can say that these *apparent things,* such as independently existent elephants and coffee cups, are always nonexistent. States of mind exist in their place, *experiences of elephants and coffee cups,* masquerading as independent phenomena. *That* nonexistence—the nonexistence of the apparent reality—is the consummate nature that all such phenomena have.

Vasubandhu also distinguishes the mind in its role as transcendental subject from its role as object, as it appears to itself. In the first aspect, to which Vasubandhu refers as the "foundation consciousness" (Tib.: *kun gzhi,* Skt.: *ālaya-vijñāna*), the mind functions as the condition of the appearance of phenomena, and hence as the ground of the possibility of the imagined and other-dependent natures. But in its second aspect—the "emerged consciousness" (Tib.: *'jug pa'i shes pa,* Skt.: *pavṛtti-vijñāna*)—the mind exists as the object of introspection, and is conditioned both by external phenomena that appear in perception and by its own phenomena. Hence it constantly evolves, and emerges in new states as a consequence of experience. The seven aspects of the mind to which Vasubandhu alludes in verse 6 are the five sensory consciousnesses, the introspective consciousness apprehending the self as object, and the reflective consciousness of the transcendental subject of experience.

Vasubandhu also thematizes subject/object duality in this text, arguing that although ordinary subjectivity presents its objects as distinct from itself, this is illusory, and the consummate nature is in fact nondual. His account is subtle and is always pitched in both a metaphysical and a phenomenological voice. He asks of each of the natures in what sense it implicates such a duality as part of the structure of the object of experience and in what sense it is in fact nondual. But he also asks these questions regarding the nature of the corresponding object of subjectivity itself. So in each case he asks whether,

or in what sense, in a subject considering things *as other-dependent,* and so on... there is such a duality, as well as asking whether, or in what sense, each nature implicates such a duality in the structure of the object.

Consider, for example, a teacup from the standpoint of its other-dependent nature: From this standpoint, the cup as I experience it, the only cup I see, exists as an entity dependent on the mind. The cup so-considered certainly exists: It exists as a mental phenomenon—as a representation. On the other hand, we can ask what the objective character[2] of that representation is. Then the answer is simple, and takes us back to the imagined nature: The cup considered *objectively* is the real, independent cup of naïve understanding, which, when we understand it from the standpoint of the dependent nature, does not exist at all, just in virtue of the fact that from this standpoint it is dependent. So, from the perspective of the dependent nature, the cup—the dependent mental phenomenon we mistake for a real cup—like the refraction pattern we mistake for water in a mirage—exists. But that real cup that is the *content* of that mental episode does not.

Now we come to the consummate nature of our cup. The cup we have been considering all along, whether from the standpoint of the imagined or the dependent nature, is, in an important and common sense, dual in nature. In its imagined nature, it is an independent object of mind, and so is distinct from the subject which apprehends it. But in its dependent nature, as an episode of mind, it is still, as a mere episode or mental act, distinct from the mind, which is its agent or subject. In the consummate nature, this duality vanishes. For the consummate nature of the cup is the very fact of its illusory status—that it is nothing other than an aspect of mind. Hence the apparent, dual, cup is, in its consummate nature (or, equivalently—from the point of view of one of consummate attainment) utterly nonexistent. *But that nonduality really exists.* That *is* the final nature of the cup.[3] And in this sense, the consummate nature embraces both existence and nonexistence: the nonexistence of the cup as dual is its true existence as nondually related to the mind apprehending it. This consideration of duality and nonduality as the mediators of existence and nonexistence in the consummate is a distinctive feature of *Trisvabhāvanirdeśa.*

All of this is central to Vasubandhu's creative union of ontology and phenomenology. Vasubandhu's characterization of the status of the objects of experience is at the same time self-consciously a characterization of the character of subjectivity itself. Not only does Vasubandhu argue that we can only make sense of objects if we ascribe to them these triune natures,

2. In the scholastic or Cartesian sense—the character of the mental object itself.

3. Note how this account of the ultimate nature of a phenomenon contrasts with that given by Mādhyamika philosophers such as Nāgārjuna or Candrakīrti, according to whom not even the emptiness of the cup can be said to exist in this sense. It is at this crucial point in ontology that Cittamātra and Madhyamaka are utterly discontinuous.

but he also argues that a complete account of experience—especially of the experience of a sophisticated and accomplished philosopher or meditator—requires an account of three distinct aspects of subjectivity, which are related to one another as are the three natures themselves. Our experience involves a superimposition of illusory externality and independence on states of consciousness; deep reflection allows us to understand and to eliminate this illusion.

This phenomenology is crucial to the soteriological purport of the system. For this is not speculative philosophy for its own sake but a philosophical system designed to guide a practitioner to buddhahood in order that he or she can work to alleviate the suffering of all sentient beings. And buddhahood requires a clear understanding of the nature of one's own mind, of the objects of one's own experience, and of the nature of dependent origination that makes up their reality, as well as the unreality of our misleading experience of them, which is the source of all suffering.

Trisvabhāvanirdeśa is unique in Vasubandhu's corpus in its exposition of idealism as involving the doctrine of the three natures, in its detailed analysis of the natures themselves, and in its exploration of their relations to one another. In *Viṃsatikā-kārikā,* Vasubandhu clearly defends idealism against a series of objections but does not explicitly articulate the roles of the three natures in his idealistic theory or expound its structure. In *Triṃśikākirikā,* Vasubandhu explores the relation between the three natures and the three naturelessnesses (naturelessness with respect to characteristic [*laksaṇa-nisvabhāvatā, mtshan nyid ngo bo nyid med*], naturelessness with respect to production [*utpatti-nisvabhāvatā, skye ba ngo bo nyid med*], and ultimate naturelessness [*paramārtha-nisvabhāvatā, don dam pa'i ngo bo nyid med*]) adumbrated in the *Saṃdhinirmocana-sūtra* but does not explore their relation to idealism, *per se,* or their relations to one another. It is only in the *Trisvabhāvanirdeśa* that he explicitly analyses idealism as implicating the three natures, and explains in detail how they are interconnected.

Sthiramati, in his commentary on *Triṃśikākirikā (Triṃśikākirikā-bhāsya)* argues that the three natures and the three naturelessnesses are equivalent. His understanding of the three natures as equivalent to the three naturelessnesses of the *Saṃdhinirmocana-sūtra* is adopted uncritically by such Tibetan doxographers as Tsongkhapa[4] and Khedrupjey (mKhas grub rJe).[5] The adoption of this commentarial tradition, which emphasizes the homogeneity of the *Saṃdhinirmocana-sūtra* with Vasubandhu's and Asaṇga's thought, along with the exposition of the three natures as presented in *Triṃśikākirikā* and *Viṃsatikā,* reinforces the elision of this more mature and explicit articulation of Vasubandhu's theory from subsequent developments of Yogācāra. The emphasis of the dominant Madhyamaka school on naturelessness as a fundamental metaphysical tenet and its need to see Yogācāra

4. See *Legs bshad snyings po,* translated in Thurman 1984.

5. See *sTong thun chen mo,* translated in Cabezon (1992).

as the penultimate step to its own standpoint lends further impetus to this tendency to assimilate these two doctrines. Of all of the Mādhyamikas, only Candrakīrti really takes the *trisvabhāva* doctrine itself seriously as a target for critique (*dBu ma la jugs pa, Madhyamakāvatāra*).[6]

The thirty-eight verses of the text divide neatly into six sections. In the first six verses, Vasubandhu introduces the three natures and provides a preliminary characterization of each. He emphasizes that the other-dependent is experienced in ordinary consciousness through imagination, and that the consummate nature is the fact that that imaginary nature is nonexistent. In verses 7–9 he sketches two schemata for thinking about the character of mind from the standpoint of three nature theory. On the one hand there is the foundation consciousness, which is the repository of the seeds of experience and action, and on the other hand there are the constantly evolving introspectible sensory consciousnesses that we experience through the ripening of these potentials.

Verses 10–21 develop a dialectically complex and elegant discussion of how to view the polar pairs of existence/nonexistence, duality/unity, and affliction/nonaffliction in relation to each of the three natures, culminating in a discussion of the senses in which the natures are identical to one another and the senses in which they are different. For each nature, there is a sense in which it is real and a sense in which it is unreal; a sense in which it issues in subject-object duality and a sense in which awareness of it deconstructs that duality. The imagined and the other-dependent are essentially involved in affliction; the consummate is free from all affliction.

Verses 22–25 present the natures hierarchically from the standpoint of pedagogy and soteriology. The imagined nature is easiest to understand and most familiar to us, and so is presented first. Understanding the imagined nature leads one to understand the dependent, and to separate the dependent from the imagined, leading to an understanding of the consummate.

Vasubandhu presents the famous simile of the hallucinatory elephant conjured by the stage magician in verses 26–34. This is probably the most famous and often-cited moment in this text. In a vivid and simple image, Vasubandhu presents a way of understanding the three natures, their relation to one another, to idealism, and of the phenomenology they suggest to Buddhist soteriology. We are asked to imagine a magic show in which a magician, using some simple props and a mantra, induces the audience to see a nonexistent elephant. The elephant, which is seen, and is the intentional object of the perceptual and cognitive states of the crowd, is the imagined nature—it exists as illusion, gives rise to affective and conative states, to other cognitive states, and so on, but is not real outside of the minds that perceive it, and does not exist as it appears. The percept, as opposed to the elephant, is a real cognitive state that is in fact empty of the elephant. That is the dependent nature, mistaken for an elephant, but really only a cognitive

6. Translated in Huntington and Wangchen 1992 (see esp. pp. 162–168).

process. The fact that there is no elephant at all is the consummate nature of the elephant. All subject-object duality in the experience is illusory, and is tied up with the imagined. The foundation consciousness is compared to the mantra. It is the source of the illusion. Reality, the dependent nature stripped of all superimposition, is compared to the props used by the magician. They are not seen at all in the experience of the elephant, only once the mantra has stopped working or, less metaphorically, when the foundation consciousness is purged of all seeds of delusion.

The concluding four verses are devoted to the soteriological implications of the text. Understanding the nature of our phenomenology and of the nature of reality enables the cessation of the suffering that arises from attachment to and aversion from illusory objects, and leads to liberation.[7]

Translation

1. The imagined, the other-dependent and
   The consummate:
   These are the three natures
   Which should be deeply understood.
2. Arising through dependence on conditions and
   Existing through being imagined,
   It is therefore called other-dependent
   And is said to be merely imaginary.
3. The eternal non-existence
   Of what appears in the way it appears,
   Since it is never otherwise,
   Is known as the nature of the consummate.
4. If anything appears, it is imagined.
   The way it appears is as duality.
   What is the consequence of its non-existence?
   The fact of non-duality!
5. What is the imagination of the non-existent?
   Since what is imagined absolutely never
   Exists in the way it is imagined,
   It is mind that constructs that illusion.

7. This translation is from the Tibetan text. The principal version used is that in the sDe dge edition of the Tibetan canon (Si 12a–14a). The Peking edition was used for comparison, and is in complete concordance. Anacker 1984 and Wood 1991 each reprint the original Sanskrit text. This translation originally appeared in Jay L. Garfield, *Empty Words: Buddhist Philosophy and Cross-Cultural Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 130–135. We gratefully acknowledge permission to republish this work.

6. Because it is a cause and an effect,
The mind has two aspects.
As the foundation consciousness it creates thought;
Known as the emerged consciousness it has seven aspects.

7. The first, because it collects the seeds
Of suffering is called "mind."
The second, because of the constant emergence
Of the various aspects of things is so called.

8. One should think of the illusory non-existent
As threefold:
Completely ripened, grasped as other,
And as appearance.

9. The first, because it itself ripens,
Is the root consciousness.
The others are emergent consciousness,
Having emerged from the conceptualization of seer and seen.

10. Existence and non-existence, duality and unity;
Freedom from affliction and afflicted;
Through characteristics, and through distinctions,
These natures are known to be profound.

11. Since it appears as existent
Though it is non-existent,
The imagined nature
Is said to have the characteristics of existence and non-existence.

12. Since it exists as an illusory entity
And is non-existent in the way it appears
The other-dependent nature
Is said to have the characteristics of existence and non-existence.

13. Since it is the non-existence of duality
And exists as non-duality
The consummate nature
Is said to have the characteristics of existence and non-existence.

14. Moreover, since as imagined there are two aspects,
But existence and non-existence are unitary,
The nature imagined by the ignorant
Is said to be both dual and unitary.

15. Since as an object of thought it is dual,
But as a mere appearance it is unitary,
The other-dependent nature
Is said to be both dual and unitary.

16. Since it is the essence of dual entities
And is a unitary non-duality,
The consummate nature
Is said to be both dual and unitary.

17. The imagined and the other-dependent
Are said to be characterized by misery (due to ignorant craving).
The consummate is free of
The characteristic of desire.

18. Since the former has the nature of a false duality
And the latter is the non-existence of that nature,
The imagined and the consummate
Are said not to be different in characteristic.

19. Since the former has the nature of non-duality,
And the latter has the nature of non-existent duality,
The consummate and the imagined
Are said not to be different in characteristic.

20. Since the former is deceptive in the way it appears,
And the latter has the nature of its not being that way,
The other-dependent and the consummate
Are said not to be different in characteristic.

21. Since the former has the nature of a non-existent duality,
And the latter is its non-existence in the way it appears,
The other-dependent and the consummate
Are said not to be different in characteristic.

22. But conventionally,
The natures are explained in order and
Based on that one enters them
In a particular order, it is said.

23. The imagined is entirely conventional.
The other-dependent is attached to convention.
The consummate, cutting convention,
Is said to be of a different nature.

24. Having first entered into the non-existence of duality
Which is the dependent, one understands
The non-existent duality
Which is the imagined.

25. Then one enters the consummate.
Its nature is the non-existence of duality.
Therefore it is explained
To be both existent and non-existent.

26. These three natures
Have the characteristics of being non-cognizable and non-dual.
One is completely non-existent; the second is therefore non-existent.
The third has the nature of that non-existence.

27. Like an elephant that appears
Through the power of a magician's mantra—
Only the percept appears,
The elephant is completely non-existent.

28. The imagined nature is the elephant;
The other-dependent nature is the visual percept;
The non-existence of the elephant therein
Is explained to be the consummate.

29. Through the root consciousness
The nonexistent duality appears.
But since the duality is completely non-existent,
There is only a percept.

30. The root consciousness is like the mantra.
Reality can be compared to the wood.
Imagination is like the perception of the elephant.
Duality can be seen as the elephant.

31. When one understands how things are,
Perfect knowledge, abandonment,
And accomplishment—
These three characteristics are simultaneously achieved.

32. Knowledge is non-perception;
Abandonment is non-appearance;
Attainment is accomplished through non-dual perception.
That is direct manifestation.

33. Through the non-perception of the elephant,
The vanishing of its percept occurs;
And so does the perception of the piece of wood.
This is how it is in the magic show.

34. In the same way through the non-perception of duality
There is the vanishing of duality.
When it vanishes completely,
Non-dual awareness arises.

35. Through perceiving correctly,
Through seeing the non-referentiality of mental states,
Through following the three wisdoms,
One will effortlessly attain liberation.

36. Through the perception of mind-only
One achieves the non-perception of objects;
Through the non-perception of objects
There is also the non-perception of mind.

37. Through the non-duality of perception,
Arises the perception of the fundamental nature of reality.

Through the perception of the fundamental nature of reality
Arises the perception of the radiant.

38. Through the perception of the radiant,
And through achieving the three supreme Buddha-bodies,
And through possessing Bodhi:
Having achieved this, the sage will benefit him/herself and others.

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20

Understanding the Two Truths

Tsongkhapa's *Ocean of Reasoning: A Great Commentary on Nāgārjuna's "Mūlamadhyamakakārikā"*

Jay L. Garfield

Tsongkhapa (1357–1419) is without a doubt the most influential philosopher in Tibet's rich philosophical history. His extensive corpus includes commentaries on important Indian philosophical texts (including the text from which this selection is drawn), an encyclopedic treatise on the Buddhist path to awakening, a text on tantra, and one on Buddhist hermeneutics. Tsongkhapa founded the Gelukpa (dGe lugs pa) school of Tibetan Buddhism and its first principal monastic university, Ganden (dGa ldan), and established the monastic curriculum in which so many important, subsequent Tibetan philosophers were educated.

Tsongkhapa was largely responsible for raising the salience of Candrakīrti's interpretation of Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka philosophy in Tibet, as well as for stimulating interest in the epistemology of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti. A central theme in Tsongkhapa's work, in evidence here, is the vindication of a robust sense of reality about conventional truth, as opposed to a view that the ordinary world is merely illusory and best ignored. Tsongkhapa believed that good metaphysics, good epistemology, and good ethics require one to take the world of ordinary experience seriously. He also believed that the distinction between the two truths is at bottom an epistemological distinction, and hence that understanding the nature of knowledge is fundamental to understanding metaphysics.

The text from which this selection is drawn is the latest canonical commentary on Nāgārjuna's *Mūlmadhyamakakārikā* (Fundamental verses on the Middle Way). In this text, Tsongkhapa surveys the major Indian commentaries

(those of Buddhapālita, Bhāvaviveka, Avalokitavrata, and Candrakīrti) and takes note of previous Tibetan literature on the text, providing a grand metacommentary on that literature, in which he defends Candrakīrti's reading. The commentary on each verse is often extensive, surveying not only previous commentarial literature but also relevant *sūtra* literature, and more general philosophical issues as well. As such, it is a fine example of Buddhist scholastic commentarial work.

This selection is a commentary on verse 24:8, in which Nāgārjuna asserts that Buddhist philosophy is based on the two truths—the conventional truth and the ultimate truth. In these sections of the commentary, Tsongkhapa is explaining that distinction, and arguing that it must be drawn on epistemological grounds.

The first section of this passage (1.2.1.1.1.2.1.1) glosses the terms "conventional" and "ultimate." This follows Candrakīrti's account in his commentary *Prasannapadā* (Lucid exposition). The subsequent sections follow Candrakīrti's commentary, as well as his *Madhyamakāvatāra* (Introduction to the Middle Way) and its autocommentary very closely, with extensive quotation from each, as is typical in this kind of commentarial literature. Tsongkhapa argues that conventional truth is reality as it is seen by ordinary cognitive agents, impaired by confusion with regard to the fundamental nature of reality. Despite this fundamental metaphysical confusion, Tsongkhapa argues, our epistemic and linguistic conventions allow us to distinguish truth from falsity within the conventional in a stable way, and to distinguish justificatory from nonjustificatory conventional epistemic practices. Otherwise, he points out, we could never come to understand ultimate truth.

While Tsongkhapa argues that the conventional and the ultimate represent the two distinct natures of every phenomenon, and so that this is a metaphysical distinction, he also argues that the basis of the distinction is epistemological: To be the conventional nature is just to be the nature apprehended by a conventional cognitive agent; to be the ultimate nature is to be that apprehended by an awakened being.

In the section on the classifications of conventional truth, Tsongkhapa turns to the task of spelling out the difference between conventional error and correctness, and the source of epistemic standards internal to the conventional world. He points out that conventional phenomena are deceptive not because they appear to be real but are not, but because they appear to be ultimately real, but are not. The discussion of ultimate truth emphasizes that ultimate truth, on the other hand, is nondeceptive.

This discussion is instructive for several reasons. First, it provides the reader, especially if read in the context of the *Kaccayana-gotta-sūtra* and the selection from *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* presented in chapter 2 of this volume, with an excellent example of the way Buddhist philosophy develops through the practice of commentary. Second, it demonstrates just how Buddhist metaphysics and soteriology demand careful attention to epistemology.

Finally, it presents a sophisticated account of the way the practice of justification is possible even in the context of prevalent error and so grounds the possibility of epistemic progress toward awakening in a Buddhist context that presupposes that we are profoundly deluded.[1]

Translation

1.2.1.1.1.2.1. The Nature of the Two Truths That Is Not Understood

This section has two parts: the explanation of the literal meaning of the root text and showing that one must ascertain the meaning as it is explained in the *Commentary*.

1.2.1.1.1.2.1.1. Explanation of the Literal Meaning of the Root Text

Suppose someone asked, "Who is it that argues without understanding the purpose of emptiness as explained by the *mādhyamika*?"

> 8. The Buddha's teaching of the Dharma
> Is based on two truths:
> A truth of worldly convention,
> And an ultimate truth.

Those who present the above arguments are adherents of our own schools. They are merely interested in reciting the scriptures but do not have a nonerroneous understanding of the distinction between the two truths as it is explained in the scriptures. Therefore, the noble Nāgārjuna, in order to dispel others' misunderstandings of the meaning of the scriptures, and in order to set out nonerroneously the presentation of the two truths in the scriptures, says that the Dharma taught by the transcendent Buddhas is based entirely on the two truths: a truth of worldly convention and an ultimate truth.

Here, "world" refers to the person that is designated on the basis of the aggregates. This is because, as it is said,

> The world is dependent on
> That world that is known as the aggregates.[2]

1. The translation that follows was originally published in Tsongkhapa 2006, pp. 479–489. We gratefully acknowledge permission to republish this work.

2. This and the following citations refer to the sDe dge edition of the Tibetan canon. *Brahmaviśeṣcintiparipṛcchā-sūtra, mDo sde* ba, 36b.

Thus it is said that that which depends on the transitory aggregates is the world.[3]

"Convention" refers to lack of understanding, or ignorance; that is, that which obscures or conceals the way things really are.[4] This is explained in this way as the Sanskrit term for "convention," *saṁvṛti*, can mean *concealment* as well. But not *all* conventions are said to be concealers.

Alternatively, "convention" can be taken to mean *mutually dependent*. Since things must be mutually dependent, the meaning of "untrue" is that they do not essentially have the ability to stand on their own. This approach to explaining the meaning of the word is applicable to "ultimate truth" as well, but the word "conventional" is not used to refer to it. This is like, for example, the word "grown-from-the-lake," which is literally applicable to a frog but is not used to refer to a frog.[5]

Alternatively, "convention" can be taken to mean *signifier*, that is, mundane nominal convention. Convention in this sense is also said to be characterized by expressions and the objects of expressions, awareness and objects of awareness, and so on. Therefore, "subjective convention" does not refer merely to expressions or to awareness.

Suppose one asked, "Does not the use of 'mundane' in the expression 'mundane convention' mean that there is convention that is not mundane?" Here the word "mundane" is not used to exclude some nonmundane convention. It just expresses the way things exist. In other words, those whose perceptions are erroneous because of deterioration of the sense faculties due to such things as cataracts, growths on the eye, or jaundice do not constitute the world from the perspective of which things are regarded as conventionally real. Therefore, those perceptual objects affected by sense faculties that are affected by such things as cataracts are not regarded as real according to mundane convention. Therefore, in order to distinguish it from these, the word "truth" is qualified in the expression "mundane conventional truth."

Since it is a *fact* and it is *supreme*, it is called the ultimate.[6] It is true because it is not deceptive from the perspective of those who perceive things as they really are.

3. In Tibetan there is a close lexical relationship between the phrases "depending on the transitory aggregates" (*'jig pa phung po la brten pa*), and "world" (*'jig rten*). In Sanskrit as well, *loka* (world) has as its root *luj*, which means to disintegrate. Tsongkhapa is referring to these lexical relationships.

4. The word translated here as "convention," *kun rdzob*, translates *saṁvṛti*, which has two principal meanings: *convention* in all of the senses common in English, as well as *concealment*, or *covering over*. Tsongkhapa is associating these meanings, and pointing out that convention conceals or covers the nature of things.

5. "Grown from the lake" (*mtsho skyes*) is a term for the lotus.

6. "Ultimate" translates *don dam*. *Don* means *fact* and *dam* means supreme, so lexically, "ultimate" in Tibetan is a compound of *supreme fact*. The same etymology is present in the Sanskrit *paramārtha*.

1.2.1.1.1.2.1.2. Showing That One Must Ascertain the Meaning as It Is Explained in the *Commentary*

As *Prasannapadā* says here [163b], the details of the two truths can be understood through the presentation in *Madhyamakāvatāra*. A brief presentation follows. Objects of knowledge are the basis of division of the two truths. The conventional truth and the ultimate truth are the entities that are the divisions of objects of knowledge. In order to understand these divisions, three topics must be addressed: conventional truth, the explanation of ultimate truth, and the presentation of the enumeration of the two truths.

1.2.1.1.1.2.1.2.1. Conventional Truth

This section has three parts: the explanation of the etymologies of "conventional" and "truth," the characteristic of conventional truth, and the classifications of conventional truth.

1.2.1.1.1.2.1.2.1.1. Explanation of the Etymologies of "Conventional" and "Truth"

Suppose someone asks, "What is convention and what is truth?" The convention from the perspective of which such things as form are posited as true is the ignorance that fabricates the essential existence of phenomena that do not inherently exist. This is because since it is not possible for things to truly exist, it is only from the perspective of mind that things can be posited as truly existent; and from the perspective of the mind that does not grasp things as truly existent nothing is posited as truly existent. Thus *Madhyamakāvatāra* says,

> Since the nature of confusion is to veil, it is obscurational.[7]
> That which is created by it appears to be truly existent.
> The sage has said that that is the obscurational truth.
> Created phenomena are obscurational. [6:28]

Here *Madhyamakāvatāra-bhāṣya* says,

> Obscurational truth is posited due to the force of afflictive ignorance, which constitutes the limbs of cyclic existence. The *śrāvakas, pratyekabuddhas,* and bodhisattvas, who have abandoned afflictive ignorance,

7. Candrakīrti (and Tsongkhapa) is (are) glossing the Sanskrit term *saṁvṛti* and the common Tibetan translation *kun rdzob*. The Sanskrit has a wide range of lexical meaning, including *ordinary, everyday, nominal,* and *by agreement,* but also *concealed, occluded, covered.* The Tibetan *kun rdzob,* though it also covers all of these senses, has as its primary lexical connotation *disguised.* Here Candrakīrti is explaining that the conventional obscures its ultimate nature. I will usually translate *kun rdzob* as *conventional* except when this connotation is essential, in which case I will use obscurational.

> see compounded phenomena, to be like reflections, to have the nature of being created; but these are not truths for them because they are not fixated on things as true. Fools are deceived, but for those others—just like an illusion—in virtue of being dependently originated, they are merely obscurational.[8]

This does not demonstrate that those who posit the existence of obscurational truth posit through ignorance, nor that from the perspective of the *śrāvakas, pratyekabuddhas,* and bodhisattvas, who have abandoned afflictive ignorance, it is not posited as conventional truth. The reason for the first is that, as has been previously explained, since it is through afflictive ignorance that one grasps things as truly existent, the object that is thereby grasped cannot possibly exist even conventionally, and whatever is an obscurational truth must exist conventionally. Thus, the obscuration on the basis of which phenomena are posited as obscurationally existent cannot be the obscuration that is regarded as afflictive ignorance.

The reason for the second is that for those who have abandoned the obscuration of afflictive ignorance—because of the absence of that obscuration in virtue of which they take things as real, from the perspective in which things are posited as truly existent—compounded phenomena are established as not being truths from their perspective, but it is not established that they are not obscurational truths. Thus, when it is said that compounded phenomena are merely obscurational from their perspective, the word "mere" excludes *truth* but in no way excludes *obscurational truth,* because, of the two—that is, "obscurational" and "truth"—truth is not possible. Thus, the sense in which the obscurational truth is true is that it is merely from the perspective of ignorance—that is, obscuration.

As Candrakīrti's treatise says, "Since it is obscurationally true, it is obscurational truth."[9] This means that conventional truth is that which is true from the perspective of ignorance—obscuration—but not that it is truly existent from the standpoint of nominal convention. Otherwise, this would be inconsistent with the system according to which nothing exists through its own characteristic even conventionally. Since the refutation of true existence and the proof of the absence of true existence are presented through nominal convention, it is not tenable that their true existence is posited through nominal convention. If they were not so presented, they could not be presented ultimately, either, and it would follow that *no framework* would be coherent.

Suppose someone thought, "In that case, since reality and the two selves are truths from the perspective of the obscuration through which one grasps true existence, they must be conventional truths." If conventional truth were posited only from the perspective of the obscuration through which one

8. *dBu ma* 'a 255a.
9. *Madhyamakāvatāra-bhāṣya* 254b.

grasps true existence, this would be the case. But we do not say this. Here we merely explained that the basis of the truth of conventional truth is that obscuration from which the perspective of which anything is true, and the sense in which it is true from that perspective.

1.2.1.1.1.2.1.2.1.2. The Characteristic of Conventional Truth

Each of the internal and external phenomena has two natures: an ultimate and a conventional nature. The sprout, for instance, has a nature that is found by a rational cognitive process, which sees the real nature of the phenomenon as it is, and a nature that is found by a conventional cognitive process, which perceives deceptive or unreal objects. The former nature is the ultimate truth of the sprout; the latter nature is the conventional truth of the sprout. Concerning this, *Madhyamakāvatāra* says,

> Through seeing all phenomena both as real and as unreal,
> The two natures of the objects that are found are grasped.
> The object of the perception of reality is the way things really are.
> That which is seen falsely is called the conventional truth. [6:23]

This shows that, from among the two natures of the sprout—the two truths about the sprout—the ultimate nature of the sprout is found by the former cognitive process and the conventional nature is found by the latter cognitive process. But this does *not* show that a *single* nature is in fact two truths in virtue of the two *perspectives* of the former and latter cognitive processes. *Madhyamakāvatāra-bhāṣya* says,

> It has been shown that each phenomenon has its own two natures—a conventional and an ultimate nature.[10]

It thus says that each phenomenon has two natures, and the ultimate is the one that is found by the cognitive process that apprehends reality, and the conventional is the one that is found by the cognitive process that perceives that which is unreal.

Since the reality of the sprout is its essence, it is called its nature. Since such things as the shape and the color of the sprout are also called its identity, they are also called its nature. In order to ascertain a pot, for instance, as a deceptive or unreal object, it is necessary to develop the view that refutes, through a rational cognitive process, the object of fixation that is that object grasped as truly existent. This is because without having rationally refuted its true existence, its unreality is not established by authoritative cognition. So for the mind to establish anything as an object of conventional truth, it must depend on the refutation of its ultimate existence.

10. *dBu ma* 'a 253a.

Although such things as pots and cloths are conventional truths, when they are perceived by the mind, the mind does not necessarily perceive the meaning of "conventional truth." This is because, although such things as pots and cloths appear like illusions, although they do not exist essentially, the mind that perceives them does not necessarily perceive the fact that they are like illusions. Therefore, it is not reasonable to say that such things as pots and cloths are conventional truths from the perspective of the common people who do not have the Madhyamaka view, but that they are ultimate truths from the perspective of the *āryas,* because this would contradict the following statement in *Madhyamakāvatāra-bhāṣya* that says

> Whatever is ultimate for ordinary beings is merely conventional for the *āryas* who are engaged with appearances. The essence of conventional phenomena, which is emptiness, is the ultimate for them.[11]

Ordinary beings grasp such things as pots as truly existent, and grasp them as ultimately existent as well. Therefore from the perspective of their minds, such things as pots are ultimately existent, but they are not conventional objects. These things, such as pots, which are ultimately existent from their perspective, are conventional objects from the perspective of the *āryas,* to whom things appear as illusionlike. Since they cannot be posited as truly existent as they are apprehended by an *āryan* consciousness, they are referred to as merely conventional.

However, since their nature is said to be ultimate truth, it should be asserted, with this distinction in mind, that such things as pots are conventional but their nature, as the *āryas* grasp it, is ultimate; but one should *not* assert that such things as pots are ultimates for the *āryas,* because the *āryas'* rational minds, which see reality, do not find things such as pots and because it is said that the distinctive characteristic of the ultimate truth is that it is found by the rational mind that sees reality.

1.2.1.1.1.2.1.2.1.3. Classifications of Conventional Truth

There are two kinds of cognitive processes that perceive unreal deceptive objects: the cognitive process associated with an acute sensory faculty, which is not impaired by any extraneous causes of misperception such as cataracts, and the cognitive process associated with a defective sensory faculty impaired by extraneous causes of misperception. In comparison to the the previous one, the latter is regarded as a fallacious cognitive process. *Madhyamakāvatāra* says,

> It is asserted that there are two kinds of perceptions of the false:
> That by acute sensory faculties and that by defective sensory faculties.

11. *dBu ma* 'a 255a.

The cognitive processes of those who have defective senses
Are erroneous in comparison to those of persons with acute senses. [6:24]

Just as there are two kinds of faculty—nonerroneous and erroneous—their objects are said to be of two corresponding kinds, unreal and real: the objects that are grasped by the cognitive processes associated with the six faculties that are unimpaired by extraneous causes of misperception and the objects that are grasped by the cognitive processes associated with the six faculties that are unimpaired by extraneous causes of misperception and the objects that are grasped by the cognitive processes associated with the six faculties that are impaired by extraneous causes of misperception, respectively. Here *Madhyamakāvatāra* says,

> That which is perceived by ordinary people
> By being grasped through unimpaired sense faculties
> Is regarded by ordinary people as real.
> All the rest is said to be unreal. [6:25]

The internal impairments of the sense faculties are such things as cataracts, jaundice, and such things as hallucinogenic drugs one has consumed. The external impairments of the sense faculties are such things as mirrors, the echoing of sound in a cave, and the rays of the autumn sun falling on such things as white sand. Even without the internal impairments, these can become the causes of grasping such things as mirages, reflections, and echoes as water, and so on. Magicians' mantras and potions should be understood similarly.

The impairments of the mental faculty are, in addition to these, such things as erroneous philosophical views, fallacious arguments, and sleep. Thus, the impairments such as ignorance with regard to the two kinds of self-grasping that develop from beginningless time are not treated as causal impairments in this context. Rather, as we previously explained, the occasional extraneous causes of misperception in the faculties are treated as impairments in this context.

Taking conventional objects grasped by such unimpaired and impaired cognitive faculties to be real or unreal, respectively, merely conforms to ordinary cognitive practice. This is because they actually exist as they appear or do not, according to whether or not they are undermined by ordinary cognition. This distinction between the real and the unreal is not drawn from the perspective of the *āryas*. This is because just as such things as reflections do not exist as they appear, such things as blue, that appear to exist through their own characteristics to those who are affected by ignorance, do not actually exist as they appear. Therefore there is no distinction between those two kinds of cognitive faculties in terms of whether or not they are erroneous.

Now, suppose someone asks: Unreal objects appear in virtue of the extraneous impairment of the sense faculties and in virtue of the impairment of the mind due to such things as sleep, such things as the appearance of men in dreams being taken to be such things as men. When one is awake, the appearance of illusory horses and elephants are taken to be horses and elephants and mirages are taken to be water. All of these can be recognized to be erroneous even by an ordinary cognitive agent. However, how are the unreal objects perceived in virtue of the impairment of the mind by bad philosophy recognized as erroneous by ordinary cognitive agents?

The impairment regarding the existence or nonexistence of which we are inquiring is not an innate erroneous grasping. Therefore, fabrication through bad philosophy merely affects those who have been indoctrinated by bad philosophy such as the doctrine of a universal principle. These cannot be recognized as erroneous by *ordinary* cognitive agents. However, since they are recognized as erroneous even by those who have not approached an understanding of the way things really are through conventional authoritative cognition, they are recognized as erroneous by *mundane* cognitive agents.

Objects like those grasped by the two innate self-graspings are called "those grasped by unimpaired faculties." Although these may be taken to be true from the perspective of an ordinary cognitive agent, they do not exist conventionally. Those *svātantrika-mādhyamikas* according to whom consciousness appears to exist through its own characteristic, and is ascertained to exist as it appears, do not distinguish between the real and the unreal in terms of cognitive subjects. However, they distinguish between the real and the unreal on the basis of whether or not the object exists through its own characteristic in the way it appears, as *Satyadvaya-vibhāga* says:

> Although they are similar in appearance,
> Based on whether or not it can perform a function
> The conventional is divided into
> The real and the unreal.[12]

However, in our system, whatever appears to the ignorant to exist through its own characteristic is maintained to be an appearance polluted by ignorance. Therefore, there is no division of conventional objects into the real and the unreal. Here *Madhyamakāvatāra-bhāṣya* says,

> Whatever is conventionally false is not conventional truth.[13]

This statement means that from the perspective of the conventions of the ordinary person who has linguistic skills, things such as a reflected image of the face are not the real face. Therefore, from that perspective, they are not even conventional truths. However, it is a conventional truth in the sense that it is an object that is found by a cognitive agent that sees deceptive unreal objects. Nonetheless, just as the cognitive faculty to which the reflected image appears is erroneous with respect to the object

12. *dBu ma* sa 2a.
13. *dBu ma* 'a 254b.

that appears to it, the ignorant are in error with respect to the objects that appear to them, such as blueness, which appears to exist through its own characteristic.

To posit the perceptual object as real would contradict its being posited by an erroneous cognitive agent. On the other hand, to posit it as an unreal perceptual object would support that. Otherwise, unreal objects, including illusions, would have to be posited as conventionally existent. In that case, conventional truth would not be possible, because if something is not true by nominal convention it would be contradictory for it to be conventionally true.

1.2.1.1.1.2.1.2.2. The Explanation of Ultimate Truth

This section has three parts: the explanation of the meanings of "ultimate" and "truth," the characteristic of ultimate truth, and the classifications of ultimate truth.

1.2.1.1.1.2.1.2.2.1. Explanation of the Meanings of "Ultimate" and "Truth"

Prasannapadā says,

> Since it is a fact [*don*] and it is supreme [*dam pa*] as well, it is ultimate [*don dam*]. And since *it* is true, it is the ultimate truth. [163b]

Therefore, Candrakīrti does not maintain, as do others, that the uncontaminated wisdom of meditative equipoise is the supreme truth and that the ultimate is its object. He instead maintains that "ultimate truth" indicates both that it is a fact and that it is supreme.

The respect in which ultimate truth is a truth is that it is nondeceptive. It does not deceive ordinary beings by existing in one way and appearing in another. It is only posited as existing as ultimate truth through the power of mundane nominal conventions. This is because, as *Yuktiṣaṣṭikāvṛtti* says,

> Suppose someone asked, "In that case, why is nirvana said to be an ultimate truth?" Because it does not deceive ordinary beings regarding its mode of existence. Only through mundane nominal conventions is it said to exist as ultimate truth. Compounded phenomena, which are deceptive, are not ultimate truths. Since three of the truths are compounded phenomena, they appear to have essence, although they do not. Therefore, since they deceive fools, they are regarded as conventional truths.[14]

14. *dBu ma* ya 7b.

This is a response to the opponent's assertion that since nirvana is posited from the perspective of conventional truth it is not tenable that it is an ultimate truth [*Madhyamakāvatāra-bhāṣya* 210a, 232a, 234a]. He asks, "Since *Yuktiṣaṣṭikā* says,

> When all of the victors have said
> That nirvana is the only truth,
> What wise man would think
> That all of the rest is not false? [35]

how would you interpret the statement that nirvana is the only truth and that all the rest are false?" The reply to this in the *Yuktiṣaṣṭikāvṛtti* is as follows:

> What does it mean when the Transcendent Lord said, "Oh monks! There is one supreme truth! That is nirvana, which is characterized as nondeceptive?" Since compounded phenomena appear falsely, fools are deceived. Nirvana, however, is not like that. This is because its mode of existence is to always have the nature of being nonarisen. That does not appear to fools as do compounded phenomena, which have the nature of being arisen. Therefore, nirvana always exists just as nirvana; through mundane conventions it is known as the supreme truth.[15]

Thus, since it is said that the meaning of "nondeceptive" is *true,* and since that is also the case according to nominal convention, and since the *sūtras* also say that the meaning of "nondeceptive phenomena" is *truth,* and since the meaning of "unreal" in "all compound phenomena are unreal, deceptive phenomena" is *deceptive,* the meaning of "true" should be understood as *nondeceptive.*

Thus, the "truth" in "conventional truth" means *true from the perspective of grasping things as truly existent.* It does not have the same meaning as the "truth" in "ultimate truth." The statement in *Yuktiṣaṣṭikāvṛtti* that nirvana is conventionally a truth means that the existence of nirvana as an ultimate truth is posited from the perspective of obscuration, but it does not mean that it is a conventional truth.

1.2.1.1.1.2.1.2.2.2. The Characteristic of Ultimate Truth

This section has two parts: the main point and rebutting objections.

15. *dBu ma* ya 22b.

1.2.1.1.1.2.1.2.2.2.1. The Main Point

According to *Madhyamakāvatāra*, the characteristic of ultimate truth is said to be that which is found through seeing the facticity of a genuine object of knowledge [6:23]. The autocommentary says,

> The ultimate is the nature that is found by being the object of a particular kind of wisdom of those who see reality. But it does not exist through its own nature. This is one of its natures.[16]

Since he says that it is found by the uncontaminated wisdom that perceives things as they really are, and does not exist inherently, he refutes those who say that anything that can be found by the uncontaminated wisdom of meditative equipoise is truly existent.

By saying "the particular kind of wisdom," he means that for the ultimate, it is not enough to be found by just any kind of *ārya* wisdom, but it must be found by the particular wisdom that knows things just as they are. The meaning of "to be found" is *to be established by that cognitive faculty*. The meaning is similar in the case of the conventional. The way it is found through this particular kind of wisdom is as follows: When the eye that is affected by cataracts sees hairs falling in empty space, the eye that is not affected by cataracts does not even see the appearance of falling hairs. In the same way, when those who are impaired by the cataracts of ignorance see such things as the inherent existence of the aggregates, that which is seen by those Buddhas who are free of the latent potentials for ignorance and by those who have the uncontaminated wisdom that sees things just as they are, just like that which is seen by eyes without cataracts, in virtue of not being seen to be even the slightest bit dualistic, is the ultimate truth. *Madhyamakāvatāra* says,

> Because of cataracts, unreal objects
> Such as falling hairs are mistakenly seen.
> Their reality is seen by healthy eyes.
> This should be understood similarly here. [6:29]

Here the autocommentary says,

> The nature of the aggregates that is seen by the transcendent buddhas, who are free from the latent potentials for ignorance, is the ultimate truth, just as the person without cataracts does not see the falling hairs.[17]

This says that the Buddha does not see the objects that are seen by those affected by the cataracts of ignorance through the wisdom by means of which he sees things as they really are, just as the person without cataracts does not see the falling hairs.

16. *dBu ma* 'a 253a.
17. *dBu ma* 'a 255b.

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