"Buddhist studies has evolved from offering reports of how Buddhists thought in past ages to contemporary engagement with the various traditions of Buddhism. It's delightful to follow this team of philosophers (each of whom is also a gifted historical scholar as they grapple with one of the most subtle issues in traditional Asian Buddhism and experience metaphysical, epistemological and ethical implications."

— Richard Hayes, Associate Professor of Philosophy, University of New Mexico

THE DOCTRINE OF THE TWO TRUTHS—a conventional truth and an ultimate truth—is central to Buddhist metaphysics and epistemology. The two truths (or two realities), the distinction between them, and the relation between them is understood variously in different Buddhist schools and is of special importance to the Madhyamaka school. The fundamental ideas are articulated with particular force by Nagarjuna (2nd—3rd century CE) who famously claims that the two truths are identical to one another, and yet distinct. One of the most influential interpretations of Nagarjuna's difficult doctrine derives from the commentary of Candrakirti (6th century CE). While much attention has been devoted to explaining the nature of the ultimate truth in view of its special soteriological role, less has been paid to understanding the nature of conventional truth, which is often described as "deceptive," "illusion," or "truth for fools." But conventional truth is nonetheless *truth*. This book therefore asks, "what is *true* about conventional truth?" and "What are the implications of an understanding of conventional truth for our lives?"

THE COWHERDS are scholars of Buddhist studies from the United States, Great Britain, Switzerland, Korea, Australia and New Zealand. They are united by a commitment to rigorous philosophical analysis as an approach to understanding Buddhist metaphysics and epistemology, and to the union of philology and philosophy in the service of greater understanding of the Buddhist tradition and its insights.

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5

Identifying the Object of Negation and the Status of Conventional Truth: Why the *dGag Bya* Matters So Much to Tibetan Mādhyamikas

Jay L. Garfield and Sonam Thakchöe

Emptiness as a Negation and the Object of Negation

Emptiness is the emptiness of intrinsic existence. It is, according to all of Nāgārjuna's canonical commentators in India and in Tibet, a negation and, more specifically, an *external* negation. To say that the statement,

(1) This person is empty of this intrinsic nature.

is a negation is to say that it is logically equivalent to

(2) This person does not have this intrinsic nature.

But that statement in turn is ambiguous. We could read the negation *internally* and paraphrase as follows:

(3) This person's intrinsic nature is not *this*.

Or we could read it *externally* and paraphrase thus:

(4) It is not the case that a person has this intrinsic nature.

No matter how much they affirm or deny the reality of that which is conventional, Buddhapālita, Bhāvaviveka, and Candrakīrti (as well

as both Tsongkhapa and Gorampa, whose dispute regarding the import of this point will occupy most of this chapter) agree that (4) is the correct paraphrase of (1).

This might seem surprising, especially in the context of a discussion of the two realities/truths. After all, it might seem that (3), in virtue of its implication of another kind of intrinsic nature, presumably, is *conventional existence*. But that would be to miss the importance of the *identity* of the two realities/truths, not their mere *consistency*. The person has *no other intrinsic nature*, even its emptiness. The fact that the person exists only conventionally just consists in the fact that it *is empty of any intrinsic nature*. Statement (4), in virtue of implicating no *other* kind of intrinsic nature, gets things just right. Statement (3), on the other hand, despite its superficial plausibility as the best paraphrase, sneaks in an intrinsic nature as part of conventional reality *in addition to* the negative ultimate reality. This may be one of the subtlest issues in understanding the relations between the two realities/truths and the reason for so much emphasis on the *kind* of negation emptiness represents, as well as on its *object*. To see it as an internal negation is to lose focus on the important identity.

Nonetheless, as Candrakīrti emphasizes (see Mav VI.23 cited in chapter 1), the two realities are in fact two distinct natures of each phenomenon, each of which is apprehended by a different kind of cognitive process. For this reason, even though ultimate reality is an external negation and conventional reality is nondifferent from it in one respect, there must be another respect in which they are distinct. It is with regard to this respect that disputes arise in Tibet between those like Tsongkhapa, who regard conventional truth as a kind of *truth*, and conventional reality as a *way of being real* on the one hand, and those like Gorampa, who regard conventional truth as *entirely false* and conventional reality as *unreal* on the other.

Negations, in Indian and then Tibetan logical theory, always have *objects*. We can always ask *what* is negated. And whereas in most Western logical theory, this question is always asked in the *formal* mode, taking the object of negation to be essentially linguistic, in Indian and Tibetan theory it is asked in the *material* mode, with the object of negation taken to be in the extralinguistic world (except, of course, in the case of metalinguistic discourse). This difference has important implications for how the distinction is to be drawn between the two kinds of negation. In the West, the two are distinguished in terms of the respective objects that are negated. In India and Tibet, they are distinguished instead in terms of the way in which a single object is negated.

In the West, that is, we would think of the object of an internal negation as a predicate expression or a property (conceived as an intentional object) and the object of an external negation as a proposition or a sentence. The internal

negation "my horse is not white" presupposes that I have a horse and denies that he satisfies the predicate *is white*. It follows (from the sentence together with appropriate discourse presuppositions) that I have a horse of another color. The negation operator applies to the predicate. The external negation, "it is not the case that I have a white horse," on the other hand, involves an operator that applies to the entire sentence. That is what is denied. There is no implication that I have any horse of any color. In India and Tibet, however, the *object* of the two negations is taken to be the same, but the manner in which they eliminate it is taken to be different. In each case, it is an extralinguistic fact, not a linguistic expression, and is the fact that is asserted to obtain by the sentence negated. The internal negation and the external negation each eliminate the fact that my horse is white. The whiteness of the horse is the object of negation in each case. The external negation eliminates it without implying that I have a horse of a different color; the internal negation eliminates it while implying that I do.

Given that emptiness is the negation of intrinsic natures in things, it is therefore important to answer two questions in order to understand just what that negation is and what it says about things: First, what kind of negation is it? Second, what is the object of negation? We have made it clear at least in a preliminary fashion that the *kind* of negation is *external*. We now turn to the question of the *object* of negation, the question that divides Tsongkhapa and Gorampa. We will first consider Tsongkhapa's account, according to which the object of negation is *intrinsic existence* or *intrinsic nature*. We then turn to Gorampa's, according to which it is *existence*, unqualified. We will show that Tsongkhapa's position on the object of negation leads to an understanding of conventional truth as in an important sense a *truth* and of conventional existence as a kind of *existence*, whereas Gorampa's account leads to a view of conventional truth as entirely *false* and of conventional existence as a kind of *nonexistence*.

Conventional Truth and that Negation: Two Models

Here is one possibility: The object of negation is the conventional phenomenon itself. Let us see how that plays out in an account of the status of conventional truth. Since ultimate truth—emptiness—is an external negation, and since an external negation eliminates its object while leaving nothing behind, when we say that a person is empty, we eliminate the *person*, leaving nothing else behind. To be sure, we must, as Mādhyamikas, in agreement with ordinary persons, admit that the person exists *conventionally* despite not existing *ultimately*. But,

if emptiness eliminates the person, that conventional existence is a complete illusion: The ultimate emptiness of the person shows that the person simply does not exist. It is no more actual than Santa Claus, the protestations of ordinary people and small children to the contrary notwithstanding.

Here is another possibility: The object of negation is not the conventional phenomenon itself but instead the *intrinsic nature* or *intrinsic existence* of the conventional phenomenon. The consequences of taking the object of negation this way are very different. On this account, when we say that the person does not exist ultimately, what is eliminated by its ultimate emptiness is its intrinsic existence. No other intrinsic identity is projected in the place of that which was undermined by emptiness, even emptiness or conventional reality. But the person is not thereby eliminated. Its conventional existence is therefore, on this account, simply its existence devoid of intrinsic identity as an interdependent phenomenon. On this view, conventional reality is no illusion; it is the actual mode of existence of actual things. We now turn to Tsongkhapa's reasons for taking this second option and Gorampa's reasons for taking the first option and examine the implications for their accounts of conventional truth and of the relation between the two truths.

Tsongkhapa on the Object of Negation

In the *lhag mthong* (Special Insight) section of *Lam rim chen mo*[1] (*Extensive Exposition of the Stages of the Path*), Tsongkhapa distinguishes between the soteriological object of negation (*lam gyi dgag bya*) and the epistemological object of negation (*rigs pa'i dgag bya*). The soteriological object of negation is something that exists as an object of knowledge (*shes bya la yod pa*); it comprises the obstructions to *nirvāṇa* and awakening, which are to be eliminated on the path, and will not concern us here (1993, 651).[2] The epistemological object of negation comprises two aspects: "erroneous apprehension" (*phyin ci log gi 'dzin pa*) and "the existence of intrinsic nature thereby apprehended" (*des bzung ba'i rang bzhin yod pa*). Of these, Tsongkhapa identifies the apprehended intrinsic nature as the *fundamental* epistemological object of negation since the reified object must first be negated in order to eliminate the erroneous subjective state.

1. We heavily relied on Cutler et al., and Newland (2002) for their translation of the text, although we have made changes wherever we thought they were appropriate.

2. *spyir dgag bya la lam gyi dgag bya dang rigs pa'i dgag bya gnyis yod do / de la dang po ni / . . . nyon mongs pa dang shes bya'i sgrib pa gnyis so / / 'di ni shes bya la yod pa'i dgag bya yin te / 'di med na lus can thams cad 'bad med du grol bar 'gyur ba'i phyir ro //.*

Although the soteriological and subjective epistemological objects of negation exist and are to be actively eliminated, the principal epistemological object of negation, the existence of an intrinsic nature (*rang bzhin yod pa*), is not an object of knowledge (*shes bya la med pa*); instead, it is erroneously reified (1993, 652).[3] The fact that intrinsic nature is purely a metaphysical fiction is central to Tsongkhapa's account. If it were to exist even conventionally, on Tsongkhapa's view, it could never be negated. This is because, argues Tsongkhapa, epistemic negation is not like eliminating a jar by hammering it. It involves only purging the mind of fictions. It is because intrinsic nature is a fiction that the error that takes it to be real can be effectively eliminated through philosophical practice (1993, 652).[4]

It follows that this object of negation (henceforth simply *the object of negation*) is not conventionally existent and that conventional truth is not an object of negation. In the same text Tsongkhapa provides us four key arguments defending his position that Madhyamaka's object of negation does not entail negating conventional existence.

The first argument is based on a distinction between "inability to withstand rational analysis" (*rigs pas dpyad mi bzod pa*) and "being undermined by rational analysis" (*rigs pas gnod pa*). This argument states that the investigation into whether conventional reality is capable of withstanding rational analysis does not result in its negation because, in spite of the fact that conventional reality does not withstand logical analysis and is established to be empty of intrinsic existence, conventional reality is nevertheless not undermined by the rational analysis:

A proper analysis of whether these phenomena—such things as material objects—exist, or are produced in reality, is "a line of reasoning that analyses reality," or "a line of reasoning that analyses the ultimate." We do not assert that the production of such things as material objects can withstand analysis by such reasoning. Therefore our position avoids the fallacy that there are truly existent things. One might then ask: If these phenomena cannot withstand rational analysis, then what does it mean to be "rationally undermined" (*rigs pas khegs pa*)? This challenge mistakenly conflates the "inability to

3. *rigs pa'i dgag bya ni / . . . phyin ci log gi 'dzin pa la dgag byar gsungs pa dang des bzung ba'i rang bzhin yod pa la dgag byar mdzad pa gnyis yod do / 'on kyang dgag bya'i gtso bo ni phyi ma yin te / yul thog mar ldog dgos pas so / . . . dgag bya 'di ni shes bya la med pa zhig dgos te / /yod na dgag par mi nus pa'i phyir ro //.*

4. *de lta yin na'ang yod par 'dzin pa'i sgro 'dogs skye bas dgag dgos la / 'gog pa'ang tho bas bum pa bshig pa lta bu min gyi / med pa la med par ngo shes pa'i nges shes bskyed pa ste med par ngos pa skyes na yod par 'dzin pa'i 'khrul shes ldog pa yin no //.*

withstand rational analysis" with that of "being undermined by rational analysis." (1993, 606)[5]

To ask whether something can withstand rational analyses is to ask whether it is found by a line of reasoning that analyses reality. As Candrakīrti's *Catuḥśatakaṭīkā* states: "... because our analysis is intent upon seeking intrinsic nature," it aims to discover whether such things as material objects have the intrinsic nature of being produced, of cessation, etc. Thus, the analysis is to discover whether such things as material objects have production and cessation that exist intrinsically; it is *not the case that this line of reasoning searches for mere production and cessation*. Therefore this line of reasoning is described as "that which analyses reality" because it analyses to discover whether production, cessation, and the like are established in reality (1993, 607).[6]

When such a line of reasoning analyses or searches for such things as production, it does not find a trace of them; and this is what "inability to withstand analysis" means. However, the fact that this line of reasoning does not find them does not entail that it negates (*khegs pa*) them. Rather if they did exist [ultimately] this reasoning would establish them, and since it does not, they are negated [ultimately]. The production and cessation of such things as material objects are established by conventional consciousness. They do exist but rational consciousness does not establish them; it does not find them, so how could it negate them? This is similar to a *visual consciousness: while it does not find sounds, it does not negate them* (1993, 607).[7]

5. *gzugs la sogs pa'i chos 'di dag don yin lugs la yod dam med skye'am mi skye zhes pa la sogs pa'i sgo nas tshul bzhin du dpyod pa ni / de kho na nyid la dpyod pa'i rigs pa dang mthun 'thug dpyod pa'i rigs pa zhes bya ba yin la / rigs pa des gzugs sogs kyi skye ba dpyad bzod par ni kho bo cag mi 'dod pas bden dngos su thal ba'i skyon med do / /gal te de dag rigs pas dpyad mi bzod na rigs pas khegs pa'i don yod par ji ltar 'thad snyam na / 'di ni rigs pas dpyad mi bzod pa*

6. *rigs pas dpyad bzod mi bzod kyi don ni de kho na nyid la dpyod pa'i rigs pa des rnyed ma rnyed yin la / de / zhes gsungs pa ltar / gzugs sogs la skye 'gog la sogs pa'i rang bzhin yod med 'tshol ba yin gyi / rigs pa des skye 'gog tsam 'tshol ba min no / / de lta na gzugs la sogs pa la rang gi ngo bos grub pa'i skye 'gog yod med bisal ba yin gyi / rigs pa des dpyod pa zhes bya ste de kho na nyid du skye 'gog sogs grub ma grub dpyod pa yin pa'i phyir ro //rigs pa de la de nyid la dpyod pa zhes kya ste de kho na nyid du skye 'gog sogs grub ma grub dpyod pa yin pa'i phyir ro //*

7. *de lta bu'i rigs pa des dpyad pa'am bisal ba na skye ba la sogs pa cung zad kyang mi rnyed pa la dpyad mi bzod pa zhes zer la rigs pa des ma rnyed pa tsam gyis khegs pa min gyi / yod na rigs pa des 'grub dgos pa las des ma grub na khegs pa yin no / /gzugs la sogs pa'i skye 'gog rnams kyang tha snyad pa'i shes pas 'grub pa yin gyi / de dag yod kyang rigs shes kyis mi 'grub pas des ma rnyed pas de dag ji ltar khegs te / dper na / mig gi shes pas sgra ma rnyed kyang des mi khegs pa bzhin no //*

Therefore, if such things as production and cessation existed intrinsically, i.e., were established in reality, then reason would have to find them because it accurately analyses whether such things as material objects have intrinsically existent production and cessation. Since such analysis does not find production and the like, it negates essentially established or ultimately real production, cessation, and the like (1993, 607).[8]

Tsongkhapa's second argument is based on a distinction between the "conventionally existent" (*tha snyad du yod pa*) and the "conventionally nonexistent" (*tha snyad du med pa*). On this argument what is conventionally existent (production for example) cannot be regarded as an object of negation because it satisfies the triple criterion of conventional existence: (1) its existence is taken for granted by ordinary people, (2) its existence is not undermined by conventional epistemic instruments, and (3) its conventional existence is not undermined by critical rational analysis of its ultimate nature. Its intrinsic nature, on the other hand, is regarded as the object of negation because it does not satisfy these criteria.

Intrinsically existent production (1) is not taken for granted by ordinary people (although the production is real, we don't take it to be intrinsically real); (2) no conventional epistemic instruments reveal an intrinsic nature, and (3) the idea that production has an intrinsic nature is undermined by rational analysis. Hence, when considering the ultimate nature of the production, the object of negation is its *intrinsic nature, not the production* (1993, 607).[9] (See also 2003, 63 ff.).

The third argument is grounded in his account of the negation of the four alternatives regarding production (*mu bzhi'i skye ba*). According to this argument, the Mādhyamika negates production from self, from another, from both, as well as causelessly, but this does not entail the negation of "mere production" (*skye ba tsam*) or "conventional production" (*tha snyad kyi skye ba*). This is

8. *des na skye 'gog la sogs pa rang gi ngo bos grub pa'am de kho nar grub na rigs pa des de rnyed dgos te / rigs pa des gzugs sogs la rang gi ngo bos grub pa'i skye 'gog yod med pas rang gi ngo bos grub pa las ma rnyed dgos pa las ma rnyed phyir ro / /dper na / shar phyogs su bum po yod pa'i skye 'gog sogs 'gog pa yin te / rang gi ngo bos skye ba sogs ma rnyed dgos pa las ma rnyed phyir ro / /dper na / shar phyogs su bum po med dos pa las ma rnyed phyir ro / 'tshol mkhan gyis shar du bum po med dos pa las ma rnyed phyir ro / /dper na / shar phyogs su bum po yod pa khegs pa yin gyi / 'tshol tsam das ji ltar khegs / de bzhin du rang gi ngo bos grub pa'i skye ba yod na rnyed par nges pa'i dbu ma pa'i rigs pas bisal ba na skye ba ma rnyed pa des rang bzhin nam rang gi ngo bos grub pa'i skye ba khegs pa yin gyi / skye ba tsam ji ltar khegs //*

9. *tha snyad du yod par 'dod pa dang med par 'dod pa ni ji 'dra ba zhig gi sgo nas 'jog pa yin snyam na / tha snyad pa'i shes pa la grags pa yin pa dang / ji ltar grags pa'i don de la tha snyad pa'i tshad ma gzhan gyis gnod pa med dang / de kho na nyid la 'ang rang bzhin yod med tshul bzhin du dpyod pa'i rigs pas gnod pa mi 'bab pa zhig ni tha snyad du yod par 'dod la / de dag las ldog pa ni med par 'dod do //*

because the four alternative kinds of production represent four distinct reification-tionist views of production. Inasmuch as each involves the superimposition of intrinsic nature on mere production, they are all conceptual fiction. They do not reflect our ordinary conventional talk about production. Hence, to negate them is not to negate mere, conventionally existent production, which is nothing more than dependent arising:

Suppose one argued as follows: Madhyamaka negates production from self, from another, from both and causelessly. Does this negate production? (i) If you claim that it does, then since these four alternative modes of production do not exist even conventionally in this system, there would be no need to qualify the negation of production. (ii) If you claim that it does not, then the negation of the four alternative modes of production would fail to negate ultimate production.

We reply: We do not accept the former, so I will explain the rejoinder to the latter. Those who posit ultimate production must assert that it withstands analysis by reasoning that analyses reality. As this is so, they must use reason to analyse production so as to discover in which of the four alternatives it consists—production from self, from another, etc. Hence, those who posit ultimate production are definitely required to assert that it can be analytically identified as falling under one of the four alternatives. Because we assert mere production—the arising of particular effects in dependence on particular causes and conditions—we do not accept ultimately existent production. Since we do not accept ultimately existent production, why would we use reasoning that analyses ultimate reality to analyse production as to which it is—production from self, another, and the like? For, we are not required to assert that production withstands rational analysis (1993, 633–634).[10]

The fourth argument relies on the negative tetralemma. Tsongkhapa maintains here that the object of negation for Madhyamaka cannot exist in any of the ways

10. *rang gzhan dang gnyis ka dang rgyu med las skye ba bkag pas skye ba 'di pa'i lugs la tha snyad du 'ang med pas skye ba 'gog pa la khyad par skyar mi dgos la / mi khegs na mu bzhi'i skye ba bkag pas don dam gyi skye ba khas len na de nyid dpyod pa'i rigs pas dpyad bzod du 'dod dgos la / de'i tshe rigs pas bdag dang gzhan la sogs gang las skye dpyad dgos pas don dam gyi skye ba 'dod pas mu bzhi gang rung gi dpyad pa nges par khas blang dgos so / rgyu dang rkyen 'di la brten nas 'di 'byung gi skye ba tsam zhig 'dod pas ni de kho na'i skye ba khas ma blangs la / de ma blangs pas de kho na nyid la dpyod pa'i rigs pas bdag dang gzhan la sogs pa gang las skye zhes ji ltar dpyod de rigs pas dpyad bzod du 'dod mi dgos pa'i phyir ro //.*

specified by the tetralemma (existence, nonexistence, both, and neither). But this is not a problem for *mere* existence. This is because the negative tetralemma rejects only reified existence, reified nonexistence, reified existence and nonexistence, and a reified sense of neither existence nor nonexistence. It therefore denies neither the existence of conventional phenomena nor the nonexistence of conventionally fictional phenomena nor the fact that the previously existent can become nonexistent nor the fact that such entities as illusions and mirages are neither existent in any unqualified sense nor nonexistent in any unqualified sense (1993: 637–638).[11]

Moreover, to negate conventional truth, according to Tsongkhapa, would be to negate dependent arising, and to negate dependent arising would be to negate emptiness. To negate emptiness is to negate ultimate truth. Ultimate truth therefore makes sense only when it is understood simply as the ultimate nature of real conventional phenomena since emptiness is simply their dependent arising (see chapter 2 of this volume).

In the *rTen 'brel stod pa (Praise of Dependent Arising)*, Tsongkhapa makes this point clearly:

11. *Since, as you have seen,
The meaning of "emptiness" is dependent arising,
Emptiness of intrinsic nature and
Efficacy of agent and action are not inconsistent.*

12. *If it were seen to preclude them,
One could make no sense of action in the context of emptiness.
We say that since the efficacious would have to be non-empty,
you would plunge into a terrifying abyss.[12]*

15. *Thus, since there are absolutely no phenomena,
Other than the dependently arisen,
There are absolutely no phenomena
Other than those that are empty of intrinsic nature.[13]*

11. *de 'dra ba'i khyad pa skyar rgyu med par mu bzhi ka 'gog rta dngos po yod pa dang dngos po med pa 'gog pa'i tshe de gnyis ka ma yin te zhes bkag nas / slar yang gnyis ka ma yin pa ang ma yin zhes bkag na ni khas blangs dngos su 'gal ba yin la / de tar yin kyang skyon med do zhes bsnyon na ni kho bo cag bsnyon pa dang lhan cig tu mi rtsod do //.*

12. *khyod ni nam gzhig stong pa nyid//rten 'byung don du mthong ba na//rang bzhin gyis ni stong pa dang//bya byed 'thad pa'ang mi 'gal zhing/11/ de las bzlog par mthong ba na/ stong la bya ba mi rung zhing//bya dang bcas la stong med pas/ nyam nga'i g.yang du ltung bar bzhed/12/. See also Tsongkhapa (1994).*

13. *de phyir brten nas 'byung ba las//ma gtogs chos 'ga' yod min pas//rang bzhin gyis ni stong pa las/ ma gtogs chos 'ga' med pa gsungs/15/.*

In the *Lam gtso rnam gsum* (*Three Principal Aspects of the Path*), Tsongkhapa argues that things are able to appear to us as they do because that they lack intrinsic nature. Therefore, by accepting the conventional existence of mere appearance, Tsongkhapa argues, the Mādhyamika eschews reification without eschewing commitment to conventional reality; reificationism is a conceptual error, and its elimination requires a correct understanding— not the elimination—of conventional truth. Moreover, he argues, seeing things to be empty of intrinsic nature undermines nihilism because to see things as empty is to see them as they really are. Hence, emptiness alone resolves the problem of nihilism because only in the context of emptiness is causal efficacy possible and hence conventional existence.

Tsongkhapa hence delivers an account of the object of negation according to which while emptiness is an external negation, it is a negation of intrinsic nature, not a negation of conventional truth. This allows him to preserve a robust sense of the reality of the conventional world in the context of emptiness and to provide an analysis of the relation between emptiness and conventional reality that makes clear sense of the identity of the two truths. We now turn to Gorampa's account of the object of negation, according to which conventional reality itself is that object.

Gorampa on the Object of Negation

In the *Lta ba ngan sel* (*Elimination of Erroneous Views*), Gorampa also distinguishes the soteriological object of negation from the epistemic object of negation. According to Gorampa, the soteriological object of negation, which will play a greater role in Gorampa's account than it does in Tsongkhapa's, "comprises all false appearances" (2001, 101–102; 1969b, 595f).[14] By "false appearance," Gorampa means anything that appears to our mind. Therefore, all conventional phenomena are false appearances. Appearances, he claims, are conceptually produced. So, when conceptual reification ceases, appearance also ceases. Insight into reality puts an end to conceptual reification and so to appearance. Therefore, Gorampa insists that the Mādhyamikas "should aim to develop a correct understanding of both the 'illusory-like conventional' (*kun rdzob sgyu ma lta bu*) and the 'ultimate freedom from conceptual fabrication'" (*don dam spros bral bu*) (2001, 101; 1969b, 594–594).[15] To achieve this cessation, the Mādhyamikas' "first priority should be the negation of the reality of appearances; thus the

14. lam gyi dgag bya ni 'khrul pa'i snang ba mtha' dag yin no/.
15. bsgrub bya ni kun rdzob sgyu ma lta bu dang/ don dam spros dral [sic] gnyis yin la/.

unreality of appearances is the principal thing to be established" (1969b, 594–595).[16] Appearance progressively disappears as one's naïve and false view of things disappears.

Gorampa refers to the epistemic object of negation as the "object of negation by scripture and reasoning" (*lung dang rigs pa'i dgag bya*). He distinguishes two types: the object (*yul*), comprising all conventional truths, and the subject (*yul can*), comprising all cognitions except an ārya's meditative equipoise. This distinction between the subjective and the objective epistemic objects of negation is fundamental to his framework. He emphasizes the distinction between nonerroneous nondual knowledge and erroneous dualistic appearance. All conventional knowledge is dualistic in virtue of being constituted by an apprehending subject and its apprehended object; it inevitably reifies the dichotomy between subject and object.

Gorampa claims that the object of negation consists in all conventional truth—subjective and objective. In the *Nges don rab gsal* (*Illumination of the Object of Ascertainment*) he writes:

So, in the case of the first extreme, the basis of negation is this: the very basis of the debate (*rtsod gzhi*) for arguing about whether a thing exists or not is itself the basis of negation (*'gog gzhi*). (1969a, 388d; 2002, 163–164)[17]

All phenomena which are apprehended as positive entities— characterized as "truly established" (*bden par grub pa*), "ultimately established" (*don dam par grub pa*), "really established" (*yang dag par grub pa*), "essentially established" (*ngo bo nyid kyis grub pa*), "intrinsically established" (*rang bzhin gyis grub pa*), "established through their own characteristics" (*rang gi mtshan nyid kyis grub pa*), "truly produced" (*bden pa'i skye ba*), "merely existent as true entities" (*bden pa'i dngos po yod pa tsam*), etc.—must be negated. This is because none of these are affirmatively established as positive phenomena when these bases of negation are subjected either to Prāsaṅgika or to Svātantrika forms of logical analysis. (1969a, 389a–b; 2002, 164–165)[18]

16. de gnyis ka la yang thog mar snang ba bden pa dgag dgos pas snang ba bden med bsgrub bya'i gtso bo yin no/.
17. des na mtha' dang po gang la 'gog pa'i gzhi ni gang zhig bden par yod med rtsod pa'i rtsod gzhi de nyid yin te/.
18. gzhi de dag gi steng du bden par grub pa / don dam par grub pa / yang dag par grub ba / ngo bo nyid kyis grub pa / rang bzhin gyis grub pa / rang gi mtshan nyid kyis grub pa / bden pa'i skye ba / bden pa'i dngos po yod pa tsam la sogs pa sgrub pa'i sgo nas gzung ba'i chos thams cad 'gog ste thal rang gnyis char gyis dpyad gzhi de dag la rigs pas dpyad pa'i tshe yongs good du grub pa'i chos ci yang med par 'dod pa'i phyir ro /.

Gorampa argues that since the Mādhyamika's investigation into whether things are "real/true" (*bden pa*), "existent" (*yod pa*), or "truly/really established" (*bden grub*), and so on purports to be an analysis of real phenomena rather than fictional entities, the failure to find the reality of things through such analysis entails that those things do not exist and so that so-called conventional reality is entirely nonexistent. Gorampa writes:

Suppose someone replied: If that were the case, even conventional truths would have to be the object of negation from the perspective of the ultimate rational analysis.

Precisely, absolutely. This is because they are not found at all when subjected to ultimate rational analysis. (1969a, 392c; 2002, 178)[19]

Gorampa also argues that the Prāsaṅgika Mādhyamika rejects the reality of all existent objects because s/he rejects the existence of any common object that can be a basis of philosophical debate between the Abhidharmika and the Prāsaṅgika. He argues that since the Abhidharmika is committed to the reality of things and because Prāsaṅgika and Abhidharmika have no object that they accept in common, the Prāsaṅgika must be interpreted as rejecting the reality of things. If, as Tsongkhapa would have it, the Prāsaṅgika's negation of intrinsic existence did not entail negating the reality of the things themselves, then, in Gorampa's view, there could be an object accepted by both as the basis of the debate. But that would be contradictory to the Prāsaṅgika claim to positionlessness in virtue of the impossibility of such a debate:

Otherwise, if one were debating whether or not appearances are real, the subject would have to be taken to appear in the same way to both the proponent and the opponent. Then if you agreed to this on the grounds of maintaining that only the reality of appearances is to be negated, but not the appearances themselves, you would fall from the Prāsaṅgika position. (1969a, 392c; 2002, 178)[20]

As we have seen, for Tsongkhapa, "mere appearance" is a conventional *truth* and is not the object of negation. What is negated is only appearance established as real, that is, *really established appearance* (*bden grub kyi snang ba*), a conceptual fiction superimposed on the mere appearance. However, for

19. 'o na kun rdzob bden pa'ang mthar thug dpyod pa'i rigs ngor dgag bya' 'gyur ro zhe na shin tu'ang 'dod de / mthar thug dpyod pa'i rigs pas brtsal ba'i tshe mi myed pa'i phyir ro /.

20. de lta ma yin na snang ba'i steng du bden par yod med rtsod pa'i tshe rgol gnyis ka la mthun snang du grub pa'i chos can snang ba yod par 'gyur te / de'i tshe snang ba'i steng du bden pa tsam 'gog gi snang ba mi 'gog par khas blangs pa'i phyir 'dod na thal 'gyur ba'i lugs las nyams so /.

Gorampa, Tsongkhapa's distinction between *mere appearance* (*snang ba tsam*) and *really established appearance* is of no significance. Neither is real. To endorse either is to reify and to provide a common object for debate, at least in the realm of appearance, hence undermining Candrakīrti's account of Prāsaṅgika.

Gorampa also argues that endorsing the conventional reality of conventional truth undermines soteriology:

If there is grasping to the reality of phenomena, i.e., the [five] aggregates, then similarly grasping to the reality of person (*gang zag kyi bden 'dzin*) will surely arise, which is itself primal confusion, the first of the twelve links. And all of the subsequent links arise from this one. Thus the root of suffering is grasping to the reality of phenomena (*chos kyi bden 'dzin*). (1969a, 389b-c; 2002, 165)[21]

Gorampa also argues that awakening requires the denial of the reality of conventional phenomena:

Those who seek to achieve awakening must negate reality: seekers of the awakening of the śrāvakas must negate the reality of the five appropriated aggregates; seekers of the awakening of the pratyekabuddha must, in addition to the former, negate the reality of the external objects and of afflictive defiled phenomena; and seekers of the awakening of the Mahāyāna must negate the fabrication (*spros pa*) of all four extremes. (1969a, 389c-d; 2002, 166-167)[22]

Since all forms of reality must be negated in order to attain full awakening, for Gorampa there is no room for conventional truth as reality.

Moreover, Gorampa argues, conventional realities are objects of negation because their existence is not verified by a buddha's enlightened gnosis. He asserts in *Yang dag lta ba'i 'od zer* (*The Bright Light of the True View*):

From the perspective of that kind of cognition, dependently arisen things are the objects of negation; since they are essentially pacified, dependent arising itself too is termed "peace." (1969c, 292a)[23]

21. chos phung po la bden par 'dzin pa'i bden 'dzin yod na dngos 'dras gang zag gi bden 'dzin nges par 'byung / rgyu'i gtso bo ni chos la bden par 'dzin pa'i bden 'dzin yin te /.

22. byang chub thob par 'dod pa dag gis bden pa dgag dgos te / nyan thos kyi byang chub thob pa ni myer len gyi phung po'i steng du bden pa dgag dgos / rang rgyal gyi byang chub thob pa la de'i steng du gzung ba phyi rol gyi don dang kun nas nyon mongs kyi chos sogs la bden pa dgag dgos / theg chen gyi byang chub thob pa la mtha' bzhi char gyi spros pa dgag dgos pa'i phyir /.

23. blo de'i ngor rten 'brel de nyid dgag bya de dag zhi ba'i rang bzhin du gnas pas rten 'brel de nyid la yang zhi ba zhes bya'o /.

In *Nges don rab gsal*, under the section called "Analysis of whether or not the two truths exist at the level of buddhahood," Gorampa is more direct:

Conventional realities presented in the contexts [of Nāgārjuna's MMK XXIV.8–10 and Candrakīrti's Mav VI.23–24] are nonexistent [at the level of buddhahood] because where there is no erroneous apprehending subject, its corresponding object [i.e., conventional reality] cannot exist. (1969a, 446b; 2002, 399)[24]

Finally, Gorampa argues that conventional reality is the object of negation on the grounds that all conventional realities are fabrications and that awakening requires the transcendence of all fabrication (*spros pa*) and conventional reality in *Nges don rab gsal*. Gorampa identifies fabrication (*spros pa*) and conventional reality in *Nges don rab gsal*:

In short, the entire conventional and nominal framework, including the eight entities such as arising and cessation addressed in the homage verses of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, as well as everything examined in the twenty-seven chapters, from the one on conditions to the one on views, plus what they present, is fabrication. (1969a, 447c)[25]

Given that fabrication must be negated to achieve awakening, it is clear that all of conventional reality must go. For Gorampa, therefore, there simply is no truth in conventional truth; to be conventionally real is to be completely unreal. To see things as they are is to see nothing at all.

The Central Insight: The Degree to Which Conventional Truth Is True Hinges upon the Understanding of the Object of Negation

Our task here is not to adjudicate the debate between Tsongkhapa and Gorampa. Thalchöe (2007) addresses that issue in detail. Instead, we wish to draw attention to an important refinement that Tibetan thinkers introduced into Madhyamaka philosophy's understanding of the nature of conventional truth and the relation between the two truths. Emptiness was always understood in Madhyamaka thought as a negation and always understood as an external negation. But

24. *zhes pa'i skabs nas bstan pa'i kun rdzob bden pa ni med de / yul can mthong ba brdzun pa med pas / de'i yul med pa'i phyir ro//.*

25. *mdor na rtsa ba shes rab kyi mchod brjod kyi skabs kyi skye 'gag la sogs pa brgyad dang/ rab byad nyi shu rtsa bdun gyis dpyad par bya ba'i rkyen nas tsa ba'i bar nyi shu rtsa bdun dang/ des mtshon nas kun rdzob tha snyid kyi rnam gzhag thams cad spros pa yin . . ./.*

going this far does not allow one to determine precisely the status of conventional truth or the relation between the two truths.

By asking the more precise question concerning the object of negation, we can understand the ambivalence in Indian Madhyamaka philosophy and in subsequent traditions more deeply. If one takes the object of negation to be conventional phenomena themselves, conventional truth must be regarded as entirely false, truth only from the perspective of fools, and conventional phenomena as nothing at all. There is no correct perception of conventional phenomena. The only truth on this view is ultimate truth, and the apprehension of ultimate truth is the apprehension of emptiness; in virtue of the fact that emptiness on this view amounts to the nonexistence of apparent phenomena, this is the apprehension of nothing at all.

If, on the other hand, one takes the object of negation to be *intrinsic nature*, superimposed conceptually through primal confusion on conventional phenomena that are in fact empty of such natures, conventional truth is a kind of truth, correlative with ultimate truth. To understand conventional truth correctly is to perceive conventional phenomena as dependently arisen, as empty of intrinsic nature. Ultimate truth on this view is the truth about conventional phenomena, and without them, there would be no ultimate truth either. Perception of ultimate truth is not the perception of nothing but the perception that conventional truth is empty of anything more than nominal existence.

These are radically distinct views of the nature of conventional truth and of the relation between the two truths. Each view, as an account of Indian Madhyamaka thought, has scriptural support, and indeed each view can be supported by citations from different passages of the same text or even slightly different contextual interpretations of the same passage. But by directing our attention to the question of the object of negation, Tibetan scholars have developed a productive way of prosecuting debates about the status of the conventional that reveals more nuance than would have been available otherwise.

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