

Recognizing My Mother An Introduction to Madhyamika

piiopah

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*The true nature of an event is marked by
No permanence, no impermanence;
No arrival, no departure;
No exterior, no interior;
No origination, no extinction.*

- Hui-neng

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PART I BACKGROUND AND BASIC CONCEPTS

*“May precious bodhicitta take its birth
In those in whom it has not taken birth.
And where it has been born, let it not cease
But swell and increase ever more and more.”*

- Shantideva

I. Happiness and Suffering

Happiness. The phantom menace that provokes. The jester that taunts. The waxing moon that promises. The quintessential and yet ever elusive destination toward which we ambulate. What is this thing *happiness*? Is it a thing? Is it a moment? A feeling? A constant? An illusion? Is it subjective? What *is* happiness?

And it is such that by way of a simple question, wars are fought, art is conjured, love is consecrated or violated, and gods are born, traded, crucified, or merely forgotten...

What is happiness? Haunted by this question and visions of inexorable suffering, Siddhartha Gutama, the historical Buddha, abandoned his wife, child, riches, and birthright to his father’s throne in order to dedicate his life to unlocking the mystery of happiness and its antithesis. Remaining dissatisfied after several years of training with various gurus in different parts of Asia, Siddhartha eventually became a *buddha*, or “awakened one”, after meditating under a Bodhi Tree in modern day Bodhgaya. It was soon after his enlightenment that the Buddha gave his first teaching to five disciples at Deer Park in Sarnath¹. This first teaching is known as ‘The Four Noble Truths’².

The ‘Four Noble Truths’ – the truth of suffering, the source of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the path to cessation – embody in essence the entirety of all else the Buddha would teach over the course of his life. The first truth, the truth of suffering, is an unadulterated assessment or statement of fact. It is an admonition that the nature of life is suffering. The second truth is the product of seeing the true nature of existence. One who is “awakened” to the true nature of the universe realizes fully the dependency relations and temporal momentum that are the sources of suffering. It is thus that an awakened one³ is brought to the realization that suffering has a source and as such is not an immutable or insurmountable singular condition. It is the second truth that yields the third, for if there are causes and conditions upon which suffering depends then

¹ Near modern day Varanasi.

² See Appendix A

³ The term *buddha* means “awakened one”.

suffering can be overcome. Therefore, it is essentially the second noble truth that produces the soteriological purpose that drives all Buddhist philosophy and practice. Finally, the fourth truth is a course of action, a path. The fourth truth is methodology. As the Buddha's aims were entirely and unwaveringly soteriological, the methods, theories, rituals, and other components of his teachings were always adapted to the specific and individual needs of the pupil. As His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama explains:

The Buddha taught the Four Noble Truths first, as the foundation of his whole doctrine. As he elaborated his teachings, he adapted his words to suit different needs and mental capacities.⁴

The methods employed by a Buddhist practitioner, therefore, are subject to, dependent on, and ultimately determined by the conditions and circumstances that impede or expedite liberation. In essence, then, *any* method that removes obstacles or propels one towards liberation falls within the domain of the fourth truth. That teachings and practices vary from person to person, culture to culture, and era to era is not only to be expected, but is a natural manifestation of interdependence – an aspect of reality revealed in the second truth. Thus the admonishment of the *four reliances* found in the sutras:

Do not rely on individuals, rely on the teachings.
Do not rely on the words, rely on the meaning.
Do not rely on the adapted meaning, rely on the ultimate meaning.
Do not rely on intellectual knowledge, rely on wisdom.⁵

II. Ignorance and Emptiness

The Buddha taught that all sentient beings are victims of their own misguided past actions. As a simple law of cause and effect, *karma* is best understood as a matter of natural dynamics – a being's past determines its future. As such, our actions are causal factors in determining our future states⁶. That each and every one of us is trapped in a cycle of suffering that changes in character but never ends results from having multi-layered and iterative mistaken views on the nature of reality, phenomena, and ourselves. Just as a single seed from a piece of fruit can spawn an entire tree of fruits that each house dozens of seeds similar to the first, a single erroneous view can spawn a vast and intricate web of misconceptions, each of which can foster its own web and so on. It is in

⁴ His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama *A Flash of Lightening in the Dark of Night* (Shambhala Publications, Inc. Boston 1994) pg 5. Hereafter cited as FLDN followed by the page number.

⁵ FLDN, 6

⁶ On an immediate level, this is easy to observe all around us. A person prone to thievery is likely to not be trusted or have close companions. Such a person may also develop correlated afflictive emotions such as paranoia or jealousy. On the other hand, a compassionate and generous person is more likely to secure the trust and respect of others and is less likely to develop deeply rooted paranoia, jealousy, or other afflictive emotions.

this very manner that beings have been building on a fundamental ignorance since beginningless time and suffering the consequences of their thoughts and actions in an endless cycle of suffering also known as *samsara*. It is liberation from this cycle of suffering that is the soteriological motivation for all of the Buddha's teachings. This liberation from or 'cessation of' suffering is indeed the Third Noble Truth.

The fundamental ignorance that spawns and bolsters other erroneous perspectives can be thought of as the ignorance of 'inherency'. That phenomenon are as they appear, that things have an inherent or essential nature or quality, or that things are 'real', are all misconceptions. These ignorant ideas are the root of afflictive emotions and attachment, which inevitably lead to suffering. The antidote employed to counteract these poisonous ideas in Madhyamika Buddhism is the doctrine of 'emptiness'. Emptiness is quite simply the assertion that phenomena are devoid of inherency. Objects, beings, emotions, conditions, and even emptiness itself is "empty" of any essential or inherent quality. It is important to note that the doctrine of emptiness is not meant to be a metaphysical theory or phenomenological school of philosophy; it is a soteriological device for exorcising emotional and intellectual attachment from the mind. In the same sense, emptiness is not the antithesis to reification. Notions that phenomena do not exist at all are nihilistic and are a common misinterpretation of emptiness, which should instead be seen as a middle path between the two extremes. Indeed, freeing the mind from attachment to these two extremes is the soteriological aim of Madhyamika Buddhism.

PART II MADHYAMIKA

AUTHOR'S NOTE

It is my intention to offer an introduction to Madhyamika thought in the form of a commentary on Chankya Rolpa Dorje's *Recognizing My Mother*. The first two chapters address basic Buddhist concepts and subsequent chapters are dedicated to Madhyamika and the doctrine of emptiness. The translation of Rolpa Dorje's text from Tibetan into English was achieved through the participation and guidance of several people. Gavin Kilty drafted an initial "verbatim" style direct translation. Upon learning of my intention to draft a translation of the text, Gavin was kind enough to offer me a copy of his preliminary work. I brought Gavin's translation to south India where I was to work on the translation with the guidance of Geshe Wangchen (see below). Upon arriving in Mundgod, Geshe Dorje Domdul of Drepung Loseling Monastery performed an initial proof of Gavin's draft⁷ which I in turn used as a starting point from which to endeavor in the translation that is presented below. Refinement, restructuring, rewording, overall guidance, and informed suggestion was provided by Geshe Namgyal Wangchen. The final translation was drafted with respect to all of the above, the teachings on dharma and Tibetan culture that I had received from my many teachers while in Dharamsala over the course of five months, and the teachings that I received on the root text from Geshe Wangchen in south India in June of 2003.

⁷ Gavin Kilty's draft appears in the appendix featuring the few minor changes made in the initial proofing completed by Geshe Dorje Domdul.

**Recognizing My Mother
(Song of the Middle Way)**

My master, kindness without compare
Imparts with total clarity
The wonderful truth of profound interdependence
May he forever remain within my heart

I will say a few words extemporaneously
From whatever understanding is within my mind

I, a mad son
Was for so long without recognition
Of the presence of my mother
Now, by good fortune it dawns upon me –
She has been with me all along

My brother, dependent arising
Unprovoked, taught me still
And now a doubt has arisen within me
About the semblance of reality
Sometimes seeming true and other times not

The internal and external world in its diversity
Is merely the exhibition of my mother's face
Likewise, the changes of birth and death merely her lies;
I have since come to know – Mother, you have continually deceived me
May my brother, dependent arising, protect me!

In my past, I have expected old mother to provide complete liberation
But, if I myself remain under the deception of these appearances –
These convincing internal and external worlds created by her
Even the buddhas of the three times
Will have no way of protecting me

These changes are mere false expressions of Mother
Freedom, therefore, is possible

Considering these manifestations of my mother
Nothing exists as true and therefore expressible
Manifestations of any sort is in every aspect a mutual dependence
Comprehension of even this fragment carries us towards full realization

To search for my old father
And not to find him
Is to find my old mother
And in her lap I discover my old father
My kind-hearted parents, protect your son!

My mother's face seems existent
Yet within the mirror of brother dependent arising it is evanescent
Traceable with neither the attribute of oneness or otherness
And I, as dull as I am
Had never discerned this

Nagarjuna and Chandrakirti
Bequeathed their legacies to the wind
Tsongkapa⁸ sent an expeditious bird to bare the message
And it is thus that I have hope in discovering
Without great toil, the faults of my old mother

In these times, some of our bright minds
So attached to nomenclature
Intone 'self-sustaining', 'truly existent', and more
And neglect this solidly existent appearance
Searching for another horned creature to refute

Upon the unveiled face of mother
No trace of this solid appearance is evident
If too many words are invoked in explanation
Without penetrating this subtle point
I suspect old mother may abscond

That which exists, of course exists
But not in the way as this upright contradiction
Mother and father
Inseparable in their harmony
Are at ease – happy and at peace

Followers of the Specifics⁹, followers of Sutra¹⁰
Mind Only School, Three Scholars of the East –

⁸ *Manjugarbha*

⁹ *Vaibashiks*

¹⁰ *Sutrantika*

They try and harness the great white form of mother elephant
With the mere striped tiger-thread¹¹ of matter
Becoming like mindless and aggravated monkeys
Or else, employing an army of words, they bind her with many a name
To the wild bear of self-sustaining existence without duality
But they have made of her such schisms that mother elephant is lost entirely

Many scholars and meditators of the Sakya,
Nyingma, Karma Kagyu, and Drugpa Kagyu
Proudly promulgate their terms and locutions
Talking of a self-knowing consciousness
Comprised of the union of ungraspable clarity and emptiness
Of the primordially pure and spontaneous face of Samantrabhadra,
Of the uncreated, innate Mahamudra
They talk of being free from asserting existence or non-existence and so on

And if they are on target, it is good and well
But I wonder at what they are pointing?

No need to be anxious,
As external phenomena are not annihilated
Be happy you believers in external phenomena

Though there is no consciousness
Cognition can be validly established
So be happy you followers of Mind Only

Phenomena do not exist by their own nature
Yet there is this diversity of dependent arisings
Be happy you Three Scholars of the East

There is no trespass in holding the still clarity
Of interdependence's multiplicity
As non-contradictory
Put away even your slightest suspicions
Upholders of the student instruction lineage

All may be well primordially pure
But even still good and bad exist
Do not cling to purity Knowledge Bearers

Though meditated with effort and contrivance
The innate realization will still occur
No need for such insistence

¹¹ String comprised of entwined black and white threads

You old Togden meditators

There is no violation in asserting the non-elaborations
Of existence and non-existence
Do not fret you stubborn logicians

However it is possible that these little obfuscations
May be attributable to those who, being ill-versed in scripture,
Are thus strangers to the terminology
I intend no disrespect
Forgive me if I have offended

I mean not to maintain omniscience or even knowledge
It is with diligence and perseverance as my coaches
That I am a well-trained equestrian
And riding the noble stallion of my ancestors' lineage
I am imbued with hope that I will be delivered
From the dual chasms that line either side of this precipice

No need to search, for this corporeality is enough
And search as I may, I am still an ostensible searcher
Do not cling to things as real for they are not
But do not condemn the false for they are what they are
Take rest! Be released from oblivion and eternity

I have mistakenly estranged my kind parents
By naming them distinctly
Infinitesimally, my vision begins to clear
And mother and father become reconciled
Thanks to my kind teachers

Nagarjuna and his followers, so kind!
Lobsang Dragpa, so kind!
My dear lamas, so kind!
In gratitude I perform the puja of mother

I pray that my unborn inexpressible old mother
Unites with her little child of the mind
And with a great festival of Bodhisattva deeds
Leads all beings to everlasting happiness

Ema! I Rolpa Dorje dance with great joy
Aho-la! In this very place – a puja for the Three Jewels

This untrue echo of a song entitled 'Recognizing My Mother' was composed by Chankya Rolpa Dorje, someone with great devotion to the Madhyamika, at the second place known as the Five Mountain Peaks. The scribe was the monk Gelek Namkha.

I received teachings on Recognizing My Mother from Geshe Namgyal Wangchen¹² at the Drepung Loseling Monastery in south India in June of 2003. It was a most undeserved and wonderful privilege to share many dialogues with Geshe Wangchen. It is with the humble hope of strengthening my tenuous comprehension of all that my teachers have imparted that I endeavor to write this commentary on Rolpa Dorje's profound text. May an ocean of compassion and wisdom wash across the universe of sentient beings and may I someday be of service to all who suffer.

*piiopah
October, 2003*

Before engaging in an analysis of the verses, a brief comment on the format of the work may be worth considering. Chankya Rolpa Dorje composed *Recognizing My Mother* in the form of an impromptu song of sorts. Though not necessarily sung and never accompanied by music, this style blends a sense of homage with poetic elucidation on various aspects of dharma. Not entirely uncommon at the time in which Rolpa Dorje lived, the style obliges the author to draw upon his or her personal understanding and internalization of teachings and transmissions¹³.

¹² Geshe Wangchen received his education at the Drepung Monastery in Lhasa before escaping Tibet in 1959. After departing his occupied homeland, Geshe Wangchen served as head librarian at Tibet House in New Delhi for several years before moving to England where he became the resident instructor at the London chapter of the Manjushri Institute. Presently, Geshe Wangchen resides at the Drepung Loseling Monastery where he serves as the primary tutor to Ling Rinpoche, the reincarnation of His Holiness the Dalai Lama's personal teacher and mentor.

¹³ This style is a stark contrast to the rote memorization and sometimes labored citing that dominates the Tibetan monasteries in modern day India.

CHAPTER 1 BODHICITTA AND THE SELF-GRASPING MIND

"In this world unsubdued and crazed elephants are incapable of causing such harms as the miseries of the deepest hell which can be caused by the unleashed elephant of my mind"

- *Shantideva*

Recognizing My Mother opens with a verse of tribute to the author's teacher. Buddhist writings and teachings frequently begin with praise to Buddha, the author's teachers, and to those who have shown the way and who have helped to preserve or expand dharma in the world. Rolpa Dorje begins his discourse with praise to his master.

1. *My master, kindness without compare
Imparts with total clarity
The wonderful truth of profound interdependence
May he forever remain within my heart*

The praise is not a simple matter of protocol. Nor is it merely a product of tradition or the style in which this and other pieces are offered. The function and significance of the master-pupil relationship cannot be overstated. His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama speaks frequently of the importance in taking care and time to choose a teacher. For, once a student has committed to a teacher, the student should have resolute dedication and unwavering faith in their master. A student should also commit wholly to long-term tutelage with an individual master. The Geluk lineage of Tibetan Buddhism, for example, deems that the minimum number of years that a student should consider committing to one teacher be ten while twice that is preferable and considered good practice. In many schools of Buddhist practice the pupil is to regard the master as the Buddha himself at all times and in every situation. The model may seem severe to Western or outside observers, but the emphases are not without good cause. A master has tremendous responsibilities with regards to each pupil. A master imparts, teaches, guides, and transmits dharma to the pupil. Consequently, a master must take on a large portion of the responsibility for a pupil's progress towards liberation. Each teacher must find the particular means and methods for guiding a pupil along the path toward

enlightenment. As the pupil is stricken with the illness of ignorance, the master must act as a spiritual physician, learned in the art of “healing”. Shantideva¹⁴ writes¹⁵:

If I need to comply with a doctor’s advice
When frightened by a common illness,
Then how much more so when perpetually diseased
By the manifold evils of desire and so forth

And if all people dwelling on this earth
Can be overcome by just one of these,
And if no other medicine to cure them
Is to be found elsewhere in the universe,

Then the intention not to act in accordance
With the advice of the All-Knowing Physicians
That can uproot every misery,
Is extremely bewildered and worthy of scorn

Therefore, one’s master becomes a personal mentor, confidant, friend, counselor, and teacher over at least a decade and most often over a lifetime. Finally, as the various masters are beacons to the world, lights to help guide those in need, their presence is invaluable and their deeds and efforts worthy of the highest praise. Indeed, in Tibetan Buddhism, there is not so much “worship of gods” as there are simply modes of expressing reverence and humility in tribute to the glorious teachers who have or will come.

One of the purposes of praise and homage is to aid in the development of *bodhicitta*. Bodhicitta is the desire, intention, drive, and movement towards full liberation from Samsara in order to benefit all sentient beings¹⁶. Developing bodhicitta and moving towards awakening begins by purifying oneself through elimination of the grossest defects and expansion on the few good qualities that are already present. Aryadeva¹⁷ admonishes¹⁸:

First be rid of evil.
Then be rid of self.
Finally, be rid of thoughts.
Wise is the one who knows this.

¹⁴ Shantideva was a Buddhist master that taught at the monastic university of Nalanda in India during the eighth-century. His text titled *Bodhicharyavatara* is an exquisite work that holds a central place in Mahayana Buddhism akin to that of the *Bhagavadgita* in Hinduism.

¹⁵ Shantideva (transl. by Batchelor, S.) *A Guide to the Bodhisattva’s Way of Life* (Library of Tibetan Works and Archives Dharamsala, 1979) pg. 19. Hereafter cited as BWL followed by the page number.

¹⁶ The first ten chapters of Shantideva’s *Bodhicharyavatara* are dedicated to the development and qualities of bodhicitta. This text is a rich guide to every step towards enlightenment and is highly recommended as a companion reader for this introduction to emptiness.

¹⁷ Primary disciple of Nagarjuna, the founder of Madhyamika Buddhism.

¹⁸ Aryadeva *Four Hundred Verses* (second century). Translation by the Dalai Lama (FLDN 20).

Evil, in essence, are those thoughts and actions that lead to suffering. Such actions and thoughts perpetuate attachment and grasping and inhibit our development of compassion and wisdom. These “evils” also increase our chances of receiving unfavorable rebirths, thus prolonging our awakening. One of the primary causes of such action or thought is ego. Hence Aryadeva’s advice: first we must forsake negative thoughts and actions under the guidance of those wiser than we, ridding ourselves of evil, and then we can address the source of those negative tendencies: our self-grasping minds.

In fostering bodhicitta, *confession* is an excellent purification agent for it acts to: 1) purify through divulgence of wrong-doings and acknowledgment of their negative consequences, 2) counter tendencies to repeat the wrong-doings, and 3) inhibit the ego via an acknowledgment of ignorance. A proper confession in Mahayana Buddhism is done by invoking the *four powers*: support, regret, resolve, and antidotes. First one seeks support by taking refuge in the Three Jewels. Next one reflects on the harmful effects of negative thoughts and action, developing genuine and sincere regret for past transgressions. The final steps are to resolve never to repeat such mistakes, employing methods to aid in this resolve. Rolpa Dorje, after his opening praise, proclaims that he will speak only from what understanding is within his mind – an understanding that, as the reader has already been informed, was imparted to him ‘with perfect clarity’ from his master. Next, he begins his narrative with a confession.

5. *I will say a few words extemporaneously*
From whatever understanding is within my mind

7. *I, a mad son*
Was for so long without recognition
Of the presence of my mother
Now, by good fortune it dawns upon me –
She has been with me all along

To be mad is to be deluded or estranged from reality. The confession is not simply an admission of ignorance in the sense that the son is uninformed, lacking the proper view, or simply without comprehension. Instead, the son offers a proclamation of having a mistaken view and miscomprehension. Thus he and the actuality of his situation were for so long unreconciled; he was mad. The admission of madness runs straight to the heart of Buddhism, for all of the various schools teach that beings have transmigrated helplessly through the various realms of Samsara since beginningless time due to actions and thoughts that are rooted in delusional ideas, concepts, perspectives and the like. Since the effects of the misguided actions only serve to enmesh us further into the quagmire of misunderstandings, the process is self-perpetuating. In order to break this cycle we must reorient our thinking so that it accords with reality. As John Powers¹⁹ explains²⁰:

¹⁹ John Powers, PhD is a specialist in Indo-Tibetan philosophy and meditation theory and is currently a faculty member in the Asian Studies Dept. at Australian National University.

²⁰ Powers, J. *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism* (Snow Lion Publications Ithaca, NY, 1995) pg. 61. Hereafter cited as ITB followed by the page number.

According to Buddhist meditation theory, the basic causes of suffering are cognitive in origin. We mentally create a vision of reality, but because of ignorance this vision is skewed and does not reflect things as they are. Some of our wrong ideas are harmless, but others lead to the creation of negative mental states, such as ignorance, desire, or hatred.

The mind that is steeped in ignorance and yields only skewed vision is known as the 'self-grasping mind'. In lines 7-11 of *Recognizing My Mother*, the narrator tells of his failure to recognize the presence of his mother despite having her continuous company. The mother in Rolpa Dorje's soliloquy is a metaphor for the self-grasping mind²¹. The self-grasping mind is not merely one that reaches for and clings to the notion of the individual self, but is the mind that believes that things exist as they appear. The mind that clings to notions of inherent existence, whether of the self or of phenomena is the self-grasping mind. This fundamental misconception of inherent existence is the root ignorance that keeps us trapped in cyclic existence. Thus, the soteriological aim of Mahayana Buddhism is to dismantle and incapacitate the self-grasping mind. In order to overcome the affliction, it must first be properly identified. And by good fortune²², i.e. - a human rebirth, the ability to practice, and the fortune to have been exposed to dharma, the narrator has realized that he is afflicted. He is now aware of the presence of his "mother".

²¹ A mother is a felicitous metaphor for the self-grasping mind for parents have a very strong impact on and influence over how their children view the world. Eventually, however, a break with the parents is necessary. The maturing individual begins to challenge the values and perspectives of the parent. Afterwards, the adults are hopefully reconciled with the grown child now able to appreciate the parent from his or her own particular understanding of life and the world. The choice of a mother instead of a father does not seem arbitrary either, for mothers tend to coddle their children more than fathers and tend to have stronger inclinations to make the child feel secure regardless of whether or not security actually exists. The self-grasping mind, too, provides a false sense of security and prompts us to seek happiness from within mistaken notions.

²² The favorable conditions (freedom from the eight undesirable states and the ten endowments) under which one may practice dharma and develop bodhicitta (see pg. 14 of *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation* by Gampopa - translated by Guenther for Shambala, Berkeley 1971.) is emphasized in many texts and is an important meditation in Mahayana practice.

CHAPTER 2 INTERDEPENDENCE

*"Just like the guardians of the hell worlds and
the forest of razor-sharp leaves, so is this
suffering produced by my actions; with whom
therefore should I be angry?"*

- Shantideva

12. *My brother, dependent arising
Unprovoked, taught me still²³
And now a doubt has arisen within me
About the semblance of reality
Sometimes seeming true and other times not*

Imperative in comprehending and countering the self-grasping mind is the doctrine of *interdependence*, also known as dependent arising. Interdependence refers to the reliant condition of any given phenomenon on its component causes that coincided at a particular time and space. In other words, everything in the universe is an aggregate effect of many causes on which it depends in order for it to exist. The causes themselves are effects of other causes and hence there exists only a vast web of interwoven relationships and not self-sustaining, singular, inherently existing objects or phenomena. As sentient beings, we carve out distinctions based on arbitrary criteria and feel that we are discriminating between separate and individual phenomena. Whether the criteria is spatio-temporal or rooted instead in the afflictive emotions, it is we who impute meaning and

²³ Translators note: though the Tibetan term (*l*)*kog tu* (pronounced gok-tdü) means secretly or in secret, the spirit of the passage is simply that the older brother took initiative and imparted knowledge both without being sought or requested to do so and without the younger siblings awareness that the process was taking place. In this regard, *stealthily* may be a better translation than *secretly*. Still, either one is misleading for they both inspire the notion that the teachings were “secret” teachings or done conspiratorially away from the gaze of the mother. That the teaching was not at the behest of the younger brother is what is germane in this passage and as such I have chosen the wording found above.

designation into a phenomenon²⁴. Shantideva, in verse thirty-one of chapter six of the *Bodhicharyavatara*, informs²⁵:

Hence everything is governed by other factors which
are in turn
governed by still others
And in this way nothing governs itself; none are
independent.

Chandrakirti, a seventh century monk, disciple of Nagarjuna, and forefather of Madhyamika elaborates:

A reflection that is mere designation is founded on a collocation of causes and conditions including the face and other things which themselves exist as mere designations; a house is designated as dependent on its beams and other structural components which are also mere designations; and a forest is similarly designated as dependent on trees. Just as in a dream one apprehends a sprout that is not produced in and of itself, so it is equally reasonable that no entity exists apart from its own designation; and this designation is founded on a collocation of other entities which are themselves mere designations.²⁶

While the doctrine of interdependence may seem at first glance to offer little else than an esoteric phenomenology, its impact on an individual's ability to overcome the self-grasping mind and procure more profound and reliable happiness is immense. This impact is explained clearly and elegantly by the Dalai Lama:

The view of interdependence makes for a great openness of mind. In general, instead of realizing that what we experience arises from a complicated network of causes, we tend to attribute happiness or sadness, for example, to single, individual sources. But if this were so, as soon as we came into contact with what we consider to be good, we would be automatically happy, and conversely, in the case of bad things, invariably sad. The causes of joy and sorrow would be easy to

²⁴ For example, we impute the concept of a flower into an object that is made up of constituent parts: petals, stem, leaves, roots, etc. Each of these, of course, can be further broken into constituent parts. Further, the "flower" is dependent on sun, rain, and soil - all non-flower things without which the flower could not exist. Finally, the flower came from a seed and will decay into soot. A seed is not a flower, nor is soot a flower. When we see a flower, it is a unique and transient compilation of particular ephemeral causes, yet our self-grasping minds see it as a distinct existent object.

²⁵ This version of verse 31 in chapter 6 of the *Bodhicharyavatara* was assembled using a translation from Tibetan by Stephen Batchelor (BWL 65) and a translation from Tibetan by the Padmakara Translation Group (FLDN 61)

²⁶ Chandrakirti *Madhyamakavatarabhāṣya* (translated by Hopkins, 1980), 225

identify and target. It would all be very simple, and there would be good reason for our anger and attachment. When, on the other hand, we consider that everything we experience results from a complex interplay of causes and conditions, we find that there is no single thing to desire or resent, and it is more difficult for the afflictions of attachment or anger to arise... If we understand this, then the happiness and suffering we normally perceive as real and solid will be seen as something insubstantial, like magical illusions.

Indeed, the complete verse from Shantideva given in part above is¹³:

Hence everything is governed by other factors which
are in turn
 governed by still others
And in this way nothing governs itself; none are
independent.
Having understood this, we should not become angry or
annoyed
 At phenomena that are like apparitions.

As evinced in the passages above, the view of interdependence is functional. When applied to the world around us and to our own thoughts and emotions, we begin to become aware of the illusory nature of the things that had motivated our actions and reactions. After realizing that he was afflicted, Rolpa Dorje's narrating voice begins to expose the formerly beguiling tricks of his mother with the help of his brother.

17. *The internal and external world in its diversity*
Is merely the exhibition of my mother's face
Likewise, the changes of birth and death merely her lies;
I have since come to know – Mother, you have continually deceived me
May my brother, dependent arising, protect me!

The internal world of perception and cognition, as well as the external world of bodies and change - worlds that had once seemed to be a plurality of individual particulars and self-sustaining phenomena - are shown by the light of dependent arising to be merely the wares or displays of a self-grasping mind; the mother's face being exhibited. Even such former certainties as birth and death cannot remain intact when the very concept of 'self' is exploded by dependent arising. Though birth had seemed to be the beginning of a being or soul and death the being's or soul's cessation, these are deceitful notions based in the mistaken views of a self-grasping mind. It is an inescapable conclusion that if there is no essential thing or quality that can be pointed at as *the* being, then the being is not

tenable. And if the being cannot be said to truly exist, then it cannot come into existence nor cease to exist²⁷.

22. *In my past, I have expected old mother to provide complete liberation
But, if I myself remain under the deception of these appearances –
These convincing internal and external worlds created by her
Even the buddhas of the three times
Will have no way of protecting me*
27. *These changes are mere false expressions of Mother
Freedom, therefore, is possible*
29. *Considering these manifestations of my mother
Nothing exists as true and therefore expressible
Manifestations of any sort is in every aspect a mutual dependence
Comprehension of even this fragment carries us towards full realization*

As evinced in the words of the masters above, there is purpose belying the view of interdependence. The intention is not a clarification of how the universe actually *is*. The doctrine of interdependence is a concept and is intended for use as a tool towards overcoming attachment and clinging. What is at stake is true happiness - alleviation from suffering for not just the individual but for all sentient beings. Though we had expected in our pasts to discover happiness in the conventional world, the world of appearances and concepts, it is not to be found. If we continue such a vain search not even the buddhas of the past, present, and future will be able to save us from perpetuating our own suffering. We must strive towards comprehension of the inherent blessing in interdependence. For it is due to the illusory nature of appearances and change that liberation is actually possible. If our conventional views coincided perfectly with the universe then there would be no hope of escape from the suffering that it is imbued within.

²⁷ Meditation on death is one of the more important and profound meditations in Mahayana practice. What is important to note is that the essential existence of a being is not feasible but that is not to say that the conventional being does not exist. Denying that something exists is *not* synonymous with claiming that the thing does not exist. In fact, Madhyamika Buddhism would deny that beings exist *and* would deny that beings do not exist. This 'middle path' will be explained further in the upcoming section.

CHAPTER 3 EMPTINESS

PART A - CONTEXT

"Even though he is present, it is not said that the Buddha exists, that he does not exist, that he both exists and does not exist, or that he neither exists nor does not exist."

- Nagarjuna

Before exploring the remaining content of Rolpa Dorje's discourse, it behooves us to examine the *mise-en-scène* out of which the discourse was birthed. *Recognizing My Mother* is rooted in a school of Buddhist thought that originated in India in the second or third century and that was pivotal in the subsequent development of Mahayana Buddhism. Founded by Nagarjuna, an Indian philosopher whose mastery over the early Buddhist writings, known as the Pali canon, is the stuff of legends, and considered by most Buddhists to be the "second-turning" of the wheel of dharma²⁸, *Madhyamika* is believed by its adherents to be the original teaching of the Buddha. *Madhyamika*, a name derived from the Sanskrit term *madhyama*, meaning middle or neutral²⁹, is the Middle Way – the way that avoids extremes. The Buddha forsake the lavish life that he was born into, yet found no solace or answers in the ascetic life that he led for many years before attaining enlightenment. Upon becoming awakened, the Buddha taught the Middle Path, the median between extreme indulgence and extreme austerity. Nagarjuna extended the teaching of the Middle Path to include all extremes, most importantly those of dualistic thinking and of reification and nihilism³⁰. Hence, *Madhyamika* does not seek to posit what phenomena, reality, or truth *are*. It instead refutes any and all philosophies or doctrine that seek to make such claims, offering nothing in return³¹.

In an exemplary translation and commentary on Chandrakirti's *Entry Into the Middle Way*, C.W. Huntington begins the second page of his preface with a dramatic reproval: "The *Madhyamika* critique of all views and beliefs is certainly much subtler and much more radical than most Western interpretation indicates."³² While

²⁸ The Buddha's first teaching in Deer Park of the four noble truths is the first turning. See *Presentation of Tenets Jang-gya*. cf. Donald S. Lopez, Jr., (Snow Lion Publications Ithaca, 1987), pg. 245- 252

²⁹ For more see pg. X of the 'Translation and Commentary' section below.

³⁰ Cheng, Hsueh-li *Empty Logic* (Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd. Delhi, 1984) pg. 35. Hereafter cited as EL followed by the page number.

³¹ A crucial theme in *Madhyamika* Buddhism, "clearing away" ignorance does not require offering interpretations, explanations, or new claims. Nagarjuna and his subsequent followers were infamous for openly confessing to having no logic of their own despite refusing to accept the logic of the schools of thought that dominated the landscape at the time. The significance of this position is best illuminated by exploring the central tenet of *Madhyamika* Buddhism: emptiness. This endeavor will be picked up in the context of the root text in the commentary below.

³² Huntington, CW *The Emptiness of Emptiness* (University of Hawaii Press Hawaii, 1989), pg. xii. Hereafter cited as EOE followed by the page number.

Madhyamika initially took shape in opposition to various schools of thought that were busily crafting lexicons and searching for ever more complicated and technical models of philosophy - models that acted to drive the sutras and teachings into exclusive conceptual clubs and away from the edifying function that early Buddhism sought and that would later be exemplified by Madhyamika - Nagarjuna and his follower's philosophy is in essence set in opposition to a certain frame of mind, attitude, perspective, and approach. Fundamentally, Madhyamika acts as an implement for deconstruction of any doctrine or school of thought that proffers a value-free, objective view of truth, reality, or the like. Such a blanket challenge and unbridled refutation of any and all objective views can be traced back to the influence of *Prajnaparamita* literature on Nagarjuna's developing philosophical thought³³. The full body of *Prajnaparamita* literature was written over a period of approximately one-thousand years. No doubt, one of its central concepts, *nisprapañca* - the inexpressible in speech and unrealizable in thought, helped cement the soteriological emphasis and aim in Madhyamika Buddhism.

The soteriological motivation underpinning Madhyamika is what shapes its purely functional purpose. In stark contrast to the typical philosophical endeavor to discover or define an objective view of an area of interest, the deconstructionist methodology of Madhyamika is strictly cultivated and disseminated by its practitioners and champions for the purpose of destroying attachment and clinging in a stepwise manner that unhinges increasingly subtler breeds of said attachment until ultimately its very own central tenets and tools must be abandoned. This final departure from all reified or nihilistic notion is what marks Madhyamika as an edifying philosophy; once it has served its purpose it too is discarded³⁴. And in this particular case the purpose is served, that is to say - *emptiness* is actualized - only upon such a thoroughgoing abandonment.

PART B - EMPTINESS: THE EMPTY CONCEPT

"In order to refute all erroneous views, the Victorious One teaches emptiness. He who holds that there is an emptiness will be called incurable by all Buddhas."

- Nagarjuna

In exploring the doctrine of emptiness, we return to Rolpa Dorje's text.

33. *To search for my old father
And not to find him
Is to find my old mother
And in her lap I discover my old father
My kind-hearted parents, protect your son!*

³³ EL 24

³⁴ EOE xiii

In Madhyamika, the entire corpus of Buddhist literature, discourses, songs, stories, and the like provide skillful means for eradicating clinging and attachment. The Buddha is not considered a metaphysician but more of a skilled surgeon who had perfected the art of removing the cancer of ignorance. Though they know them to be ultimately devoid of meaning, the Buddha and other masters employ terms such as ‘emptiness’, ‘middle path’, ‘dependent arising’, ‘enlightenment’, and the like as tools employed to guide beings toward liberation. In Madhyamika, emptiness is the quintessential soteriological device for achieving liberation.

In *Seventy Verses on Emptiness*, Nagarjuna states³⁵:

Thus the Buddha said:
All things arise from causes and conditions;
To view them as real is ignorance
From this arise the twelve interdependent links³⁶.

Because all things arise from and are wholly dependent upon causes and conditions, viewing them as real is a mistaken view that will lead to clinging, attachment, and suffering. Freeing oneself from this view is the path to liberation and the cessation of suffering. This is accomplished through developing wisdom realizing emptiness, where *emptiness* is the lack of inherent existence of phenomena, concepts, the self, and even emptiness. As proclaimed by Aryadeva in the *Four Hundred Verses*³⁷:

The seed of existence is consciousness;
Phenomena are the field of consciousness.
If we see the non-reality of things,
We destroy the seed of existence.

Here, very simply and elegantly, emptiness is identified as ‘non-reality’, recognition of which destroys the seed of existence. In other words, the causes that keep us trapped in cyclic existence are destroyed by recognizing the empty nature of things. What is not apparent from this passage is that the empty nature of things is really a “non-nature”. Emptiness is not the metaphysically true essence of nature or the universe, instead it is a signpost that points to the lack of essence of things. Thus we must abandon our malignant notions of solidly existing phenomena, beings, and concepts. As emptiness is merely a useful concept, we must turn its devouring maw on itself as well. Thus Rolpa Dorje’s narrating voice contends:

33. *To search for my old father
And not to find him
Is to find my old mother
And in her lap I discover my old father*

³⁵ Nagarjuna *Shunyatasaptati-karika* (translated by the Padmakara Translation Group 1994) Hereafter cited as SVE.

³⁶ See ITB, pg. 66

³⁷ Aryadeva *Catuhshataka-shastra-karika* (translated by the Padmakara Translation Group 1994). Hereafter cited as FHV

My kind-hearted parents, protect your son!

His old father in this passage represents wisdom realizing emptiness. The passage above may have just as well been phrased as, “To search for my old father *is* to not find him.” To set out in search is to believe that there is something to look for. Of course, the essential message of Madhyamika is that all that is there to be found are the illusory wares of a self-grasping mind. Emptiness cannot be found by searching. Emptiness is experienced via clearing away all attachments to notions and concepts. To search is to reach for, to grasp out. After all, one cannot search without some process of delineating his object of pursuit. All that is available is the phenomena that Aryadeva said comprise the field of consciousness. This is why the narrator only finds old mother when failing in his search for his old father. The second part of this passage brings about an important distinction in Madhyamika. To say that phenomena is not real or that it lacks inherency is not to say that it does not exist at all. Misinterpretations of Madhyamika as a nihilistic school of thought fail to recognize that Madhyamika does not deny the existence of things, but instead claims that our notions of those things are erroneous. Although we are mistaken about the nature of phenomena, there exist collocations all around us. Further, it is our great fortune that these composites do exist because it is their interdependent nature that illuminates emptiness and allows us to escape samsara. Remember, earlier in Rolpa Dorje’s discourse, the narrator’s description of how it was his brother, *dependent arising*, whom revealed the presence of his self-grasping mind. Therefore, the conventional³⁸ existence of the universe, beings, concepts, and the like is the looking glass in which emptiness is to be revealed. And as such, it is in the lap of his mother, upon failing in and desisting from searching, his father is found.

Returning to the root text:

38. *My mother’s face seems existent
Yet within the mirror of brother dependent arising it is evanescent
Traceable with neither the attribute of oneness or otherness
And I, as dull as I am
Had never discerned this*

Because the average person operates within a maze of unexamined belief, inherited in large part from the observational language and naturalized interpretations imbedded in the hegemonic structure of his/her surrounding culture/society, the projections of the collocations seem to be solid appearances that reveal objects that epitomize any sensible definition of reality. Yet, when the object itself is sought, the dependent nature of the object becomes transparent and its “realness” evaporates right before our eyes.³⁹

The last two lines of the verse remind us to be grateful for our good fortunes and to practice humility by asking ourselves, “Without the masters and teachers of past, present, and future, and without the assistance of dependent arising, how could I ever hope to dissolve this ignorance?” Further acknowledgement of the blessings left us by the bodhisattvas who have come before follows in the next passage.

³⁸ see *Part D - Polarized Truth* below

³⁹ See EL, pg. 71-105.

43. *Nagarjuna and Chandrakirti*
Bequeathed their legacies to the wind
Tsongkapa⁴⁰ sent an expeditious bird to bare the message⁴¹
And it is thus that I have hope in discovering
Without great toil, the faults of my old mother⁴²

PART C - SEMIOTIC ATTACHMENT

"The problem of being (the most immediate and natural of experiences) is the least natural of all problems, the one that common sense never poses: we begin to grope our way through being by carving entities out of it and gradually constructing ourselves a World."

- Umberto Eco

For some, the seemingly existent world is so convincing that they have difficulty in recognizing their affliction. Others, however, suffer from a different sort of disease. Those cerebral individuals whom are prone to thinking deeply about matters may not be impressed by or attached to the tactile or tangible characteristics of the world around them. Being human, however, we are all prone to clinging to objective concepts of reality. Thus, for some, the real danger is in attachment to more complex and thought driven reified notions about the nature of reality. In these cases, it is often believed that one just needs a careful and critical approach and the true essence of things can be discerned. These beings have been distracted by fanciful creations and have actually lost touch with the conventional world. As emptiness is exposed most readily through the lens of the conventional world, the "bright minds" can become lost to their illusions.

48. *In these times, some of our bright minds*
So attached to nomenclature
Intone 'self-sustaining', 'truly existent', and more
And neglect this solidly existent appearance
Searching for another horned creature to refute⁴³

⁴⁰ *Manjugarbha*

⁴¹ There were two great teachers and sets of teachings. As typically happens, there follows misreadings, misgivings, confusion, and the like. Tsongkapa not only clarified the teachings and reconciled the sects, he revived the spirit, interest, and enthusiasm of the school.

⁴² Note the lack of pride or pomp or even an acknowledgment of his accomplishments (Chankya Rolpa Dorje was a noted master and disciple of Tsongkapa and wrote several commentaries on Tsongkapa's works, including his famous eulogies).

In the process of developing carefully considered and rigorous methods of uncovering or defining the essential nature of things, specialized vocabularies are often constructed and new meanings extracted from familiar words. In worship of semiotic idols, any hope for the dissolution of reified concepts is banished in favor of autoerotic meanderings. The affliction is different but the symptom is essentially the same. The tendency towards attachment and clinging remains, but the danger is not so much attachment to the apparent as it is loss of the apparent and attachment to reified abstraction via language. The attachment to language can be a mammoth obstacle and in general serves to bolster the attachment to self. Those suffering from this type of affliction are the most likely to find Madhyamika extremely difficult in application. For the tendency will be to 'come to an understanding' through a devout process of 'searching for true meaning'. As a *searcher*, however, attachment to cognitive modes is difficult to avoid and evading attachment to self is impossible. For as long as one is a *searcher* one holds in their mind thoughts of an existent being that is *searching*; i.e. someone with something to gain or lose - *the* one that is seeking, grappling, and thinking⁴⁴. Did not Descartes declare, "I think therefore I am."⁴⁵?

53. *Upon the unveiled face of mother
No trace of this solid appearance is evident
If too many words are invoked in explanation
Without penetrating this subtle point
I suspect old mother may abscond*

In Umberto Eco's essay, *On Being*, he elucidates the problem in a manifestly Western fashion⁴⁶:

The moment it appears before us, *being* arouses interpretation; the moment we can speak of it, it is already interpreted. There is no help for it.

⁴³ The horned-creature in this passage refers to human constructs that are complete fabrications, not just mistaken notions; e.g. a unicorn. The conventional reality that *is* present suffers at the expense of those wishing to duel and bicker over fabrications from their own "mills".

⁴⁴ The scenario lends itself to comparison with one of the more vivid representations in Buddhist cosmology - the realm of the hungry ghosts. In this case, the karmic momentum is supplied by the intention and effort to become a "searcher". To do so in pursuit of realizing emptiness is among the most tragic of ironies, for it instantaneously cripples the would be discoverer, making of him a hungry ghost who cannot, through the means chosen (cognitive and intellectual), be satiated. Doomed to wander the wastelands of semiotic husks, all that is tasted (all models, explanations, representations, etc) is repulsive (does not yield happiness or alleviation from suffering) and cannot be swallowed. Yet it is their very own self-imposed condition that is the source of the repulsive nature of what is tasted. For, though it is not the highest realization, the conventional world need not be repulsive.

⁴⁵ "Cogito, ergo sum." Descartes, René *Meditationes de prima philosophia* (1641)

⁴⁶ Eco, Umberto *On Being* from *Kant and the Platypus* (Vintage London, 1999), pg. 22. Hereafter cited as KP followed by the page number.

From the above passage, we might surmise that words on the whole are pitfalls on the path to liberation. We might imagine Rolpa Dorje's passage reading, "If *any* words are invoked in explanation..." Although the essence of reality cannot be cognized⁴⁷, 'the truth of the highest meaning takes its reality only through being projected onto the screen (samvrti) of conventional truth.'⁴⁸ Therefore, words that are employed skillfully can be extremely useful and beneficial and need not be considered detrimental. Indeed, further into the same essay, Eco credits 'the poets' with the ability to employ words in such a manner. It is through mindfulness, whether in selective employment of language when speaking, in vigilance of selfish tendencies when listening, or in maintaining awareness of the nature of representation whilst engaged in either activity, that the middle path is trod.

PART D - POLARIZED TRUTH

*"Conventional and ultimate -
These the two truths are declared to be.
The ultimate is not within the scope of intellect,
For intellect is said to be conventional."
- Shantideva (Bodhicharyavatara 9.2)*

In introducing two distinct types of attachments from which we should guard ourselves, Rolpa Dorje has simultaneously introduced another important conceptual mechanism by which Madhyamika seeks to further its soteriological aims. The doctrine of two-truths, or two-worlds, is simply a method utilized to limit or eliminate clinging. The two truths are that of the *conventional* level and that of the *ultimate* level. Conventional truth is *relative* truth, or that which exists at the level of emotional and intellectual attachment to what one considers fixed, determinate, and self-inherent objects. This is the world of linguistic conventions and ontological entities. This truth is a relative truth because it can only be discussed or imagined in relation to other truths that also exist at this level. Ultimate truth is the truth of awakened realization; of one whom has shed obscured delusions such as the dichotomy of subject and object. Ultimate, or *absolute* truth, is something that we experience with a mind free from semiotic clinging, dualistic reasoning, and conceptualization as a whole. The term 'ultimate truth', then, is somewhat of a misnomer, for "truth" in this sense does not mean an unadulterated understanding or perfect knowledge. Perhaps "perfect sensation" is a closer idea, as one need not apply the mind's scalpel to a sensation in order to merely experience it. That the intellect cannot grasp this absolute truth is readily apparent, for the intellect is a creature that is sustained by conceptualization, and as such is imbedded in and inextricable from the conventional realm. As found in the *prajñāparamita*⁴⁹:

⁴⁷ The *Lotus Sutra (Saddharmapundarika)* states: 'the true nature of all dharmas is entirely inexplicable and unrealizable.'

⁴⁸ EOE 39

⁴⁹ *prajñāparamita* (translated from Tibetan to English by the Padmakara Translation Group 1994). Hereafter cited as PJ followed by the page number.

The paramita of wisdom is inconceivable,
inexpressible, and indescribable.
It is not born; it does not cease; it is like space.
Only the awakened mind can comprehend it.
Before the Mother of all the Buddhas, I bow down!

Lines 58-62 of *Recognizing My Mother* refer to the two realms of conventional and ultimate truth. The self-grasping mind, as represented by the mother, is hopelessly entangled in the conventional, while wisdom realizing emptiness, as represented by the father, is free from all delusion and is fully aware of the interdependent and illusionary nature of reality. These realities are concurrent, however, and are not competing systems. The first is the truth of daily living and of normal experience. The second is a transcendental experience that is available at higher planes of awareness. Thus, the father and mother are inseparable and harmonious.

58 *That which exists, of course exists*
 *But not in the way as this upright contradiction*⁵⁰
 Mother and father
 Inseparable in their harmony
 Are at ease – happy and at peace

PART E - CONCLUSION

Armed with the tools developed in the first part of the discourse, the narrator is ready to respond to the popular schools of thought and practice that Madhyamika was birthed and nurtured in reaction to. The first refutations are directed at Buddhist institutions and are primarily aimed at pride which stems from attachment to the terms and concepts used ontologically, epistemologically, and cosmologically in each sect. The second set of refutations are intended for those who have misinterpreted Madhyamika as either nihilist or realist. Essentially, the second set is a series of applications of the doctrine of two-truths. Following a brief summary of the essential point and purpose contained throughout (lines 116-120), the soliloquy ends with another confession (lines 121-125) and an appropriate recourse to the masters and teachers from whom which the narrator has gained any understanding that he may have. Warding off pride, he cites his ancestors, and the teachers as the true sources of illumination and offers a puja - perfectly completing his teaching of the Madhyamika way.

63 *Followers of the Specifics*⁵¹, *followers of Sutra*⁵²
 Mind Only School, Three Scholars of the East –

⁵⁰ Phenomena do exist conventionally, but ultimately do not exist inherently, *and* do not exist as phenomena inherently lacking inherency.

⁵¹ *Vaibashiks*

⁵² *Sutrantika*

- 65 *They try and harness the great white form of mother elephant⁵³
With the mere⁵⁴ striped tiger-thread⁵⁵ of matter
Becoming like mindless and aggravated monkeys
Or else, employing an army of words, they bind her with many a name
To the wild bear of self-sustaining existence without duality
But they have made of her such schisms⁵⁶ that mother elephant is lost entirely*
- 71 *Many scholars and meditators⁵⁷ of the Sakya,
Nyingma, Karma Kagyu, and Drugpa Kagyu
Proudly promulgate their terms and locutions
Talking of a self-knowing consciousness
Comprised of the union of ungraspable clarity and emptiness⁵⁸
Of the primordially pure and spontaneous face of Samantrabhadra,
Of the uncreated, innate Mahamudra
They talk of being free from asserting existence or non-existence and so on*
- 79 *And if they are on target, it is good and well
But I wonder at what they are pointing?*
- 81 *No need to be anxious,
As external phenomena are not annihilated
Be happy you believers in external phenomena*
- 84 *Though there is no consciousness
Cognition can be validly established
So be happy you followers of Mind Only*
- 87 *Phenomena do not exist by their own nature*

⁵³ White mother elephant represents *being* in its continuous and purest (without imputation) sense.

⁵⁴ Translators note: *mere* was inserted in order to keep clear emphasis on the idea that a thread cannot restrain an elephant.

⁵⁵ String comprised of entwined black and white threads

⁵⁶ Translators note: the Tibetan term (s)tor is used in various contexts to denote destruction, scattering, annihilating, spreading, shattering, or sometimes exploding. The literal translation would likely be “shattered away”.

⁵⁷ Note the distinction between scholars and meditators. Meditators are practitioners experienced in the matters under discussion, whereas scholars are thinkers that are well-versed in the matters under discussion. The Madhyamika doctrines are designed for practitioners and essentially, scholars and others who approach the material only academically cannot fully realize the subtleties and profound gems held within the teachings.

⁵⁸ Though, at first glance, this may seem akin to or comparable to Madhyamika, it is actually contrary. This is an attempt to establish a thing, a suchness, an in-and-of-itself with properties such as having composition. Though esoteric (see lines 74-77), it is still delineable and ultimately leads to the establishment of another suchness: freedom (see line 77). Madhyamika refutes these notions: there is no being, nor states to be free from. The mundane conventions have been replaced by esoteric ones. This is unacceptable, or more to the point leads to further attachment. Hence the question that follows (see line 80).

- Yet there is this diversity of dependent arisings
Be happy you Three Scholars of the East*
- 90 *There is no trespass in holding the still clarity
Of interdependence's multiplicity
As non-contradictory
Put away even your slightest suspicions
Upholders of the student instruction lineage*
- 95 *All may be well primordially pure
But even still good and bad exist
Do not cling to purity Knowledge Bearers*
- 98 *Though meditated with effort and contrivance
The innate realization will still occur
No need for such insistence
You old Togden meditators*
- 102 *There is no violation in asserting the non-elaborations
Of existence and non-existence
Do not fret you stubborn logicians*
- 105 *However it is possible that these little obfuscations
May be attributable to those who, being ill-versed in scripture,
Are thus strangers to the terminology
I intend no disrespect
Forgive me if I have offended*
- 110 *I mean not to maintain omniscience or even knowledge
It is with diligence and perseverance as my coaches
That I am a well-trained equestrian
And riding the noble stallion of my ancestors' lineage
I am imbued with hope that I will be delivered
From the dual chasms⁵⁹ that line either side of this precipice*
- 116 *No need to search, for this corporeality is enough
And search as I may, I am still an ostensible searcher
Do not cling to things as real for they are not
But do not condemn the false for they are what they are
Take rest! Be released from oblivion and eternity*
- 121 *I have mistakenly estranged my kind parents
By naming them distinctly
Infinitesimally, my vision begins to clear*

⁵⁹ Nihilism and Reification.

*And mother and father become reconciled
Thanks to my kind teachers*

126 *Nagarjuna and his followers, so kind!
Lobsang Dragpa, so kind!
My dear lamas, so kind!
In gratitude I perform the puja of mother*

130 *I pray that my unborn inexpressible old mother
Unites with her little child of the mind
And with a great festival of Bodhisattva deeds
Leads all beings to everlasting happiness*

134 *Ema! I Rolpa Dorje dance with great joy
Aho-la! In this very place – a puja for the Three Jewels*

This untrue echo of a song entitled 'Recognizing My Mother' was composed by Chankya Rolpa Dorje, someone with great devotion to the Madhyamika, at the second place known as the Five Mountain Peaks. The scribe was the monk Gelek Namkha.

Madhyamika has influenced many schools of Buddhism and is the heart to be found at the core of Mahayana and Zen practices. It is a soteriologically driven practice that seeks to peel away, layer by layer, the erroneous views that Buddha long ago identified as the sources of our afflictive emotions, worldly clinging, and intellectual attachment. Simply and elegantly summarized by Chi-tsang, Madhyamika truth is 'beyond all predication. It is neither one nor many, neither permanent nor impermanent. In other words, it is above all forms of differentiation or, as its adherents might say, it transcends both difference and identity... Each thesis that may be proposed concerning the nature of truth must be negated by its antithesis, the whole process advancing step by step until total negation has been achieved; until everything that may be predicated about truth has been negated.' The central doctrine of Madhyamika, as expounded above, is emptiness - the soteriological device that can be envisioned as psychological detachment, moral illumination, epistemological insight and clarity, metaphysical devoid-ness, and spiritual liberation.

Shakyamuni Buddha diagnosed our affliction, identified its source, and provided the medicine with which to cure ourselves in addition to - and more importantly - each other. Though this introduction to Madhyamika Buddhism focused extensively on the philosophical framework built towards wisdom realizing emptiness, it is essential to keep in mind, as well as at heart, that *bodhicitta* is the perfect marriage of wisdom with *compassion*. This compassion drives us to develop along the path of the bodhisattva and practice meritorious deeds. It is also the catalyst for developing wisdom. Thus the importance of practice in addition to study. Through practice we migrate towards liberation, becoming happier and more benevolent beings along the way.

APPENDIX A

Getting to Know my Old Mother

My master, kindness without equal,
reveals with total clarity
the wonderful truth of profound dependent arising.
May he remain forever within my heart.

I will say a few spontaneous words
of whatever arises within my mind.

I, a mad and stupid son,
was for so long without my mother;
now by good fortune it dawns upon me,
she was with me all along,
and I did not recognise her.

My brother dependent arising
has taught this secret to me
so now it raises a doubt in me
if that really exists which sometimes seems there
and seems not there at other times

The inner and outer world in its variety
is but the smile of mother;
the changes of birth and death her lies;
undeceiving mother you deceive me,
my brother dependent arising will protect me, I hope

Ultimately, it is solely by the kindness of old mother
that freedom can be expected to be won,
for if the inner and outer were as inherently existent as they seem,
even buddhas of the past, present and future
would have no way to protect.

These changes are expressions
of forever unchanging mother;
freedom, therefore, exists.

Not existing as anything,
my mother has to be understood as the mere inexpressible,
manifesting is in every aspect a mutual dependence;
just this is something to realize.

Searching for my old father

and not to find him
is to find my old mother
and in her lap I find my old father.
My kind-hearted parents protect their son!

Not one, not other,
my mother's face – traceable with neither the attribute of oneness & otherness
and which seems existent is yet unfindable
when looked for in the mirror of brother dependent arising;
and I, as stupid as I am,
had never considered this.

Nagarjuna and Chandrakirti
left their legacies on the wind,
Manjugarbha has sent a bird
And stopped my effort of searching far and wide,
And expect to see my mother here with me.

These days some of our bright minds,
so attached to terminology,
'self-sustaining', 'truly existent' and so on,
ignore this solid appearance
and search for another horned creature to refute.

On the unveiled face of mother,
no trace of this solid appearance seems to exist
Without penetrating this subtle point,
you may explain and explain,
but old mother might flee elsewhere.

That which exists of course exists
but not in the way as this: erect and upright with contradiction
yet mother and father, inseparable in their harmony,
are at ease, happy and at peace.

Followers of Vaibashika, Followers of Sutrantika,
Mind Only School, Three Scholars of the East,
they ascribe the great white form of mother elephant
to the striped tiger of matter with its painted smile,
or to the brainless monkey of consciousness
or to the wild bear of self sustaining existence of non-duality
They label her with many a name
but they have shattered away the old mother.

Many scholars and meditators of the Sakya,
Nyingma, Karma Kagyu and Drugpa Kagyu

talk of a self-knowing consciousness of ungraspable clarity and emptiness,
of the primordially pure, spontaneous face of Samantrabhadra,
of the uncreated, innate Mahamudra,
of being free from asserting existence or non-existence, and so on.
Proudly you proclaim your terminology,
and if it is on target, good,
but I wonder what you are pointing at.

No need to be anxious,
external phenomena are not destroyed,
be happy you [the two](#) believers in external phenomena.

There is no consciousness knowing itself
but valid [still is the concept of cognition](#) and its object,
so be happy you followers of Mind Only.

Phenomena do not exist by their own characteristics,
yet there is this variety of dependent arising.
Be happy you Three Scholars of the East.

It is alright to hold clarity and emptiness
as non-contradictory,
put away your [slightest of suspicion](#)
upholders of the student instruction lineage.

All may be primordially pure
but good and bad exist,
do not cling to purity Knowledge Bearers.

[Though meditated with effort and contrivance](#)
the innate will [yet](#) still arise;
no need to be so insistent
you old Togden meditators

It is alright to assert the non-elaborations
of existence and non-existence;
do not fret you hard-headed logicians.

However, it is possible that this has come about
because those not well versed in scripture
are not familiar with the terminology.
I mean no disrespect to you,
Forgive me if I have offended.

I am not a young know-it-all
but I ride the noble stallion of my ancestors' lineage.

With diligence and perseverance
I **became** skilled in riding
and be delivered **with hope** from this frightening precipice path.

No need to search for it is the searcher himself,
do not cling to things as real for they are false
but do not **abdicate or refute** the false for it is truth itself.
Take rest in freedom from nihilism and eternalism

I have not seen my mother
but by just their names
it is as if my kind and long lost parents
are here standing before me.

Nagarjuna and his followers, so kind!
Lobsang Dragpa, so kind!
My kind lamas, so kind!
In return I perform the puja of mother

I pray that my unborn inexpressible old mother
comes together with her little child of the mind
and with a great festival of Bodhisattva deeds
leads all beings to everlasting happiness.

Ah yes! Rolpa Dorje
dances for joy.
Ah yes! In this very place,
puja for the Three Jewels.

This untrue echo of a song entitled 'Getting to Know Mother' was composed by Chankya Rolpa Dorje, someone with great faith in the Madhyamika, at the sacred place known as the Five Mountain Peaks. The scribe was by the monk Gelek Namkha.

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