

NOTES ON “HOW TO SEE YOURSELF AS YOU REALLY ARE”

CHAPTER 3: WHY UNDERSTANDING THE TRUTH IS NEEDED

Chapter 1 provided motivation for the inquiry into emptiness. Chapter 2 gave a narrative link between ignorance and suffering.

Now in Chapter 3, the Dalai Lama gives what many people might consider additional motivation to study the teachings, as well as laying the groundwork for the analytical method that will be used throughout the book.

Additional Motivation

The additional motivation to meditate on emptiness provided by the DL can be seen as divided into two parts.

The first part is a sort of argument from authority. The DL provides supporting quotations from several of the Indian luminaries of the Madhyamika tradition: Aryadeva (3rd century), Chandrakirti (600–c. 650), and Dharmakirti (early 7th century). The Dalai Lama calls them “the supreme scholar-practitioners of India.” The selected quotes support the conclusion that the only way for us to be free of afflictive emotions and defects is to refute our own inherent existence as well as the inherent existence of the other things that the afflictive emotions point to.

The second part of the additional motivation to meditate on emptiness is the DL’s emphasis on cyclic existence. In fact, the DL’s very first sentence in this chapter mentions it:

If you do not have insight into the way you yourself and all things actually are, you cannot recognize and get rid of the obstacles to liberation from cyclic existence and, even more important, the obstructions to helping others.

The idea is that when we realize emptiness very deeply, we will become free of cyclic existence, which is the traditional Buddhist concept of involuntary rebirth. We will also be able to help others more skillfully, because we see that they are caught in the same cycle as ourselves. Of course this functions as a motivating idea much more if we accept the idea of rebirth. There a lot of details to this process, and they need not concern us here. If you are interested in more detail, please consult the [Appendix](#) at the end of these notes.

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We need not dwell on the idea of cyclic existence, because many people do not believe in rebirth. ***And regardless of whether we believe in rebirth, the emptiness teachings can still be freeing and helpful.***

“How to Make Meditation Meaningful” and “Three Ways of Seeing Objects”

The sections called “How to Make Meditation Meaningful” and “Three Ways of Seeing Objects” (pp. 42-45), are very important to the entire book. In “How to Make Meditation Meaningful,” the DL begins to discuss analytic meditation. He wishes to make two points in this section.

1. Analytic meditation is different from just withdrawing the mind from phenomena.

The DL wishes to distinguish emptiness meditation from other kinds of meditation in which we may be deeply absorbed in a spacious, thought-free state of mind that lacks the sense of inherent existence. An experience in which the sense of inherent existence happens not to appear is certainly nice. But as a meditation, this is not enough to help us counteract ignorance. As the DL says on page 43, *this does not constitute being absorbed in the truth*. To be absorbed in the truth during our meditation, we must realize the emptiness of the self.

Meditating on the emptiness of the self is a focused process in which we discover the **opposite** of what ignorance tells us. Ignorance tells us the self exists in an inherent, fixed, independent and self-powered way. We must realize the opposite of this. We must see clearly how the self fails to exist in this way, and instead, exists as designated by thought, and as dependent, contingent, and subject to conditions and change.

If we merely withdraw from the conception of inherent existence, it is true – for that moment we will not be experiencing the conception of inherent existence. But, as the DL says on page 43, *“this does not constitute being absorbed in the truth.”* To be absorbed during our meditation in the truth, we must realize the opposite of falsity.

2. Analytic meditation requires inference and logic.

On page 43, the DL says,

You have to put together that if objects really did exist in the way they seem to, the logical consequences would be impossible, and on this basis you can fully appreciate that phenomena do not exist in this way.

and

Since accepting appearances as truth is the basic problem, the antidote is to come to realize the falsity of appearances through reasoning.

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This provides an overall framework that is the basis for almost all the Buddhist emptiness meditations you will encounter, in this book and elsewhere. The framework goes like this.

- i. If the self (or a given object I'm meditating on) existed inherently, the logical consequences would be XYZ.
- ii. But it is clear that XYZ is **logically impossible, non-existent, unfindable or absurd**; nothing is like that.
- iii. Therefore the self (or whatever I'm meditating on) does not exist inherently.

This kind of meditation is very different from other kinds. They are all helpful, but emptiness meditation involves this inferential discovery. And when you are very, very used to this process and have developed the ability to stabilize on the realization calmly in a concentrated way over time, then this discovery will go beyond the intellectual, conceptual level. **It will turn direct, nonconceptual and global.** The ability to develop calmness is discussed in Chapters 8, 9 and 18. With this kind of realization, as the DL says on page 168, *"problems can be overcome at their root."*

Three Ways of Seeing Objects

On page 44, the DL outlines three ways in which we conceive of objects. This is an aspect of the teachings specific to the DL's school of Madhyamika which is derived from the teachings of Tsong-Kha-pa.

The three ways of conceiving of objects don't pertain to the **appearances** of things as provided by the senses. Rather, they pertain to **what the mind makes of the appearances**. Does the mind assent to these appearances? Does it take these appearances as reality, or not? Here are the three ways:

1. **Conceiving the object to inherently exist, which is what ignorance does.**

When this happens, there is quite often some demanding, clinging or assertive energy taking a position, making a claim such as **"this is really there, really existent, really true,"** or **"really just like that."** A common sign that the mind is conceiving an object in this way is that there is some kind of self-involvement, self-regard, agenda, calculation of personal advantage, subtle or obvious afflictive emotion, or a position aversion or grasping involved with respect to the object.

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2. **Conceiving the object to not inherently exist, which is what insight does.**

This is what happens in the moment we are realizing that the self (or whatever we are meditating on). Even though this seeing occurs as an insight during meditation, we find that after the meditation session, its aftereffects are healing and liberating. As a meditative moment, seeing things in this way will sooner or later be followed by a subsequent moment of (1) or (3). The idea with this second kind of seeing is not to draw it out forever, but to experience the benefits of this powerful insight outside of the meditative session. Thanks to seeing things as not inherently existent during meditation, our sense of inherent existence is weakened at least a little bit from that point on. Therefore, seeing things as in (1) occurs less frequently and less strongly.

3. **Conceiving the object without qualifying it with either inherent existence or an absence of inherent existence, as when just ordinarily seeing something, such as a house.**

This is where we simply identify something in a purely conventional, pragmatic way. Seeing things like this is free of afflictions for that moment, even though that moment may be followed by another moment in which we see something as in (1).

The DL stresses the importance of identifying the phenomena and moments when these different kinds of seeings arise.

The Car

Here is an example. Let's say that I have an expensive new black Mercedes. The next week, my next-door neighbor buys a Mercedes just like it, same year, same black color and everything. We both park on the street in front of our houses, and oftentimes, the cars are right next to each other. I often look outside and see something unaccustomed out there in the street, and then remember in a very neutral way, "What's that black thing out there? Oh – that's my car." One day as I'm finishing breakfast, I hear the squeal of tires and a loud crash with the tinkling of glass. I look outside and see two a mass of tangled black metal. Right next to it, I see a pristine, unscratched Mercedes.

I go outside with a growing sense of drama and anxiety. I'm thinking, "Which car was hit? It could be either one!" As if in prayer, I say, "Please let it be **his** car and not **mine!**" If it is mine, I will feel angry and vindictive towards the driver who crashed into it. I might even protest to the newspapers about the poor state of driver's education and law enforcement in this city. I might also feel some sort of failure as a person, as if I am not the successful Mercedes-owner I thought I was.

On the other hand, if it is my neighbor's car, I'll be secretly thrilled and outwardly apologetic. "Tough luck, dude! These things happen."

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Earlier, when I said, “Oh, that’s my car,” it was a case of conceiving my car without qualifying it with inherent existence or without inherent existence. It was a case of (3). If I find that it was my car that got hit, then things suddenly change. Anger and belligerence arise, caused by my seeing the car as inherently existent. It is an inherently existent “mine,” and I conceive of myself as an inherently existent owner. It is a case of (1).

I can meditate on the car, and myself, and realize them to lack the existence the mind usually attributes to them. The moment of those insights would be cases of (2). If I do a lot of those meditations, and then such an accident happens to occur, the severity, duration and impact of (1) would be greatly diminished. A mind state as in (1) might not even happen. With enough emptiness meditation, states like (1) won’t happen.

Meditation and the Three Ways

Let’s put together the two important parts of this chapter. Using the three ways of seeing objects, we can get a clearer grasp of the difference between emptiness meditation and other types of meditation. A quick recap of the three ways of seeing an object:

1. Conceiving the object to inherently exist.
2. Conceiving the object to not inherently exist.
3. Conceiving the object without qualifying it in either way.

Emptiness meditation, with its logical and later direct refutation, is a case of (2). Meditation which just withdraws from afflictive states so as to abide in deep or vast states is a case of (3). In both (2) and (3), there is the similarity that during those moments, there is no conception of inherent existence or afflictive state present. When (2) is happening and when (3) is happening, (1) is not happening.

But here’s the difference. When we do (2), this has effects that extend beyond the meditation itself. Doing (3) works only for those same moments, after which (1) may happen again.

Doing (2) has the power to prevent the occurrence of (1).

Doing (3) does not have this power.

Both (2) and (3) are nice. But the extra power is why (2) is important to our freedom.

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Meditative Reflections for Chapter 3

Consider:

1. Ignorance leads to exaggerating the importance of beauty, ugliness, and other qualities.
2. Exaggeration of these qualities leads to lust, hatred, jealousy, belligerence, and so on.
3. These destructive emotions lead to actions contaminated by misperception.
4. These actions (karma) lead to powerless birth and rebirth in cyclic existence and repeated entanglement in trouble.
5. Removing ignorance undermines our exaggeration of positive and negative qualities; this undercuts lust, hatred, jealousy, belligerence, and so on, putting an end to actions contaminated by misperception, thereby ceasing powerless birth and rebirth in cyclic existence.
6. Insight is the way out.

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Appendix – Emptiness and Cyclic Existence

How is lack of insight related to cyclic existence? Like this. Lack of insight, also called ignorance, is the preventable factor which makes rebirth possible. The idea is that the conception of inherent existence of the “I” will generate intentions and actions; these in turn generate certain effects, some of which will be experienced by “myself,” as a conventionally designated self with a continuity of conscious mind-states, in a future life. This is a process with a very complicated set of details, and it differs according to different Buddhist schools. The process is sometimes referred to as “The Twelve Links of Dependent Arising,” which was set forth in the Mahayana **Rice Seedling Sutra** and elaborated upon in many subsequent commentaries. The following table is from

1. Ignorance
2. Action
3. Consciousness
 - a. Cause consciousness
 - b. Effect consciousness
4. Name and form
5. Six sources (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mental sense powers)
6. Contact
7. Feeling
8. Attachment
9. Grasping
10. Existence
11. Birth
12. Aging and death

There is a lot to this topic. There are Buddhist classes and seminars on this topic. There could be a facebook group just on this topic alone. But basically, the first link in the process is **ignorance**, which we are already familiar with. Ignorance sets the entire process in motion, and the only antidote to ignorance is a very deep realization of emptiness. Without ignorance, the first link is broken, and the twelve-link process is cut off at the root.

According to the DL’s Mahayana system, there are levels and levels to this ignorance. There is a level at which the involuntary rebirths have come to an end. But the process continues in a voluntary way, because compassion, wisdom and expedient means for helping others can still improve. Because of a very deep sense of compassion (**bodhicitta**), we choose to be reborn so as to continue our practices and meditations. This provides us more opportunities for wisdom and compassion. The goal at that point is to eradicate the “*obstructions to helping others*,” as the DL says in the quote above. This process continues, even to the point that we are reborn in

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subtle, post-human bodhisattva forms of greater and greater wisdom and compassion, until we reach full enlightened, omniscient Buddhahood.

There are many presentations of this process. For a presentation that is very close to what the DL has in mind in the present book, you may refer to a book written by this book’s translator and editor, Jeffrey Hopkins. Hopkins’ **Meditation on Emptiness** (Wisdom Publications, © 1996) is a 1000-page treatise on the emptiness teachings. It covers this process in Chapter 2, “Dependent-Arising of Cyclic Existence,” pp. 275-283.

As Hopkins says in **Meditation on Emptiness**, p. 281-282,

A benefit of contemplating dependent-arising is the creation of a sense of distress. ... Just as he wishes to free himself from misery, so he develops the wish to free all sentient beings due to their closeness over the continuum of lives. In this way compassion is generated, and with it as a motivation, one will seek with great vigor to vanquish ignorance....”

The following table, from Hopkins (1996), p. 279, tells the story in more detail. **One round** of dependent arising requires **three lives** to complete. In this teaching, eradicating Link 1, **ignorance**, is the only solution.

Table on Cyclic Existence

Life	Link in the 12-link process	Status as Cause or Effect
Life A, past life	1. Ignorance	Projecting causes
	2. Action	
	3. Consciousness	
	a. Cause consciousness	
Life B, present life	b. Effect consciousness	Projected effects
	4. Name and form	
	5. Six sources (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mental sense powers)	
	6. Contact	
	7. Feeling	
	8. Attachment	Actualizing causes
	9. Grasping	
	10. Existence	
Life C, future life	11. Birth	Actualized effects
	12. Aging and death	