

C. W. Huntington, Jr. A "nonreferential" view of language and conceptual thought in the work of Tsoû-kha-pa

I. GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Ever since the time when Nāgārjuna first set forth the philosophy of the Mādhyamika in his *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*-s scholars have argued among themselves over the meaning of this system and its philosophical implications. The debate began in ancient India, was transported along with the texts into Tibet and China, and now seems to have taken root among academic communities in Europe and America. It is a testament to the profundity of Nāgārjuna's thought that his *Mādhyamakāśāstra* has not only inspired almost two thousand years of continuing philosophical dialogue, but moreover seems to possess a truly striking reservoir of meaning which lends itself to the most widely disparate attempts at interpretation. Many times it has been victimized as unmitigated nihilism, while more than a few have celebrated it as an extremely subtle and rarefied variety of speculative metaphysics. And yet, within the texts composed by early Indian exponents of the Mādhyamika, most of the force of the dialectic is focused upon the destruction of any and all philosophies of substance ontology or metaphysics, while at the same time these authors very explicitly deny all charges of nihilism. The primary appeal of the linguistic interpretation of the Mādhyamika, which I am about to describe, is simply that it seems to bring us much closer to an understanding of what Mādhyamika philosophers said about themselves, as well as what they had to say about the nature of language and conceptual thought.

With the publication of Chris Gudmunsen's *Wittgenstein and Buddhism*¹ in 1977, we received the latest and most sophisticated installment in what has now become a rather well-established "linguistic" interpretation of the Mādhyamika. Robinson² was among the first to comment on the use of the word "emptiness" as a metalinguistic term intended for the express purpose of describing the primary system of everyday language. Frederick Streng³ gave considerable impetus to this interpretation, and Douglas Daye⁴ developed the notion of language levels into a very convincing analysis of the Mādhyamika's use of language. However, Gudmunsen has presented us with the most comprehensive treatment of this theme to date.

I believe that the essence of Gudmunsen's "Wittgensteinian" approach can be summarized in two points which are intended to describe the nature of the dialectic as a critique of

- (a) the correspondence theory of truth, and
- (b) the so-called "referential" theory of meaning.

The first of these two theories may be stated as follows: "A sentence is true if it corresponds to a fact";⁵ and the second, which is taken as a corollary of the first,

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reads: "If a simple expression has meaning then there is a corresponding simple object."⁶ The dialectic would then be understood as a critique of these two theories in both a strictly polemical as well as a constructive sense.

1. The polemical function of the dialectic is accomplished through its criticism of the inconsistencies inherent in any kind of metaphysical language, where the expression "metaphysical language" is understood to refer to any sort of linguistic behavior that purports to derive its meaning from a source *outside* of the sociolinguistic community in which it occurs.

2. The constructive function of the dialectic is fulfilled through its presentation of a view of language and conceptual thought that is characterized as "non-referential." This view can itself be rather concisely set forth in the following way, as a reaction to the two theories just mentioned:

(a) The *truth value* of a collocation of words or concepts derives from its being used in a manner that may be seen as somehow consistent with the conceptual matrix of the sociolinguistic community in which it occurs.

(b) The *meaning* of a word or concept derives from its usage in some particular socio-linguistic community, and not from its reference to any real object.

A distinct advantage of this interpretation of the Mādhyamika over others that have been proposed is that it allows us to make sense out of the notion of *samvṛtisatya*, or "conventional truth." If meaning derives exclusively from usage in a conventional, pragmatic, or "social" context, then words and concepts that seem to refer *simply* to private objects like a *dharmā* or an *ātman* must be viewed as inherently meaningless. Private objects like these are by definition divorced from any sociolinguistic context, and they are therefore deemed irrelevant for either pragmatic or philosophical purposes. Once they have been disposed of, all that remains are "empty" names, that is, names that have no real object insofar as they do not correspond to any actual objective referent but only to other names. This being the case, Candrakīrti is quite justified in cautioning us against the danger of losing touch with the conventional truth taken for granted by the world.⁷

In the remainder of this paper, I would like to demonstrate just how this nonreferential view of language and conceptual thought can serve as an invaluable aid towards the interpretation of one particular Mādhyamika text composed by the fifteenth century Tibetan scholar Tsoñ-kha-pa.

Tsoñ-kha-pa was one of the greatest of all expositors of the Mādhyamika, the founder and spiritual inspiration of the Dge-lugs order, and perhaps the most illustrious scholar ever produced by the Tibetan tradition. In what follows I present a translation which is in effect a very short essay extracted from his massive commentary on the *Madhyamakāvātāra* of Candrakīrti, entitled *Dbu-ma dgoñs-pa rab-gsal*.⁸ This work as a whole is not only the most exhaustive commentary on Candrakīrti's original treatise, but in itself it constitutes a comprehensive and masterly account of Nāgārjuna's system according to the

interpretation formulated by the Tibetan lineage of *Prāsaṅgika-mādhyamika*. This particular passage well illustrates the clarity and precision that characterize most of Tsoṅ-kha-pa's writing.

II. THE STRUCTURE OF THE ARGUMENT

It would be misleading to imply that on the basis of this passage we could characterize the Mādhyamika as purely "linguistic" philosophy—I would rather say that in these few pages Tsoṅ-kha-pa has demonstrated certain very marked features of the Mādhyamika's philosophy of language. This philosophy of language is, however, very clearly placed in the service of Buddhist doctrine, for the essential concern here has been to construct a brief outline of the system of the two truths, by means of an explanation of the concept of selflessness (*nairātmya*). In order to accomplish this objective, he unfolds his discussion in two principal phases, both of which are further subdivided into various topics of particular relevance to his argument.

The passage begins with an outline of the mechanism through which all things are said to be posited by conceptual thought. This leads into a discussion of the ontological status of living beings as well as of insentient things which culminates in an assertion to the effect that the person is merely a concept imputed in dependence on a specific collocation of parts (or names), while each of these component parts is itself similarly imputed in dependence on another particular arrangement of composite phenomena. At the close of section A.2, we are told that "neither the composite whole nor the component parts may suitably be posited as the base of such a person, and apart from these two, there is no other entity to act as the base."⁹

In section A.3, a more complex issue is raised and the first direct reference is made to a distinction between empirically real and empirically unreal things according to the following criterion: "Every [empirically real thing] must fulfill its own function." Causal efficacy is taken as the single criterion of empirical reality in the sense that if the objective referent posited by a word or concept validly performs some function in the context of mundane experience then it is to be granted existential status at the level of conventional truth. In the case of a rope mistakenly apprehended as a snake, the objective referent of our cognition is functionally impotent, and thus we have here one example of something which is empirically unreal. The concept of "self" (*ātman*) is accordingly split in two: on the one hand, if the "I" is posited as an intrinsically existent subject, then it not only is by definition outside the matrix of cause and effect, but it has in addition already proved under analysis to be a logical impossibility; on the other hand, as a strictly pragmatic device, the concept of "I" as "agent" is in the mainstream of conventional experience and thereby stands the test of empirical reality.

Section A.4 presents a summarization of the first phase of the discussion: "Ultimately even names themselves do not exist, and in the empirical world there

is nothing aside from that which is posited on the strength of these strictly conventional labels. . . . Anything whatsoever posited as existent is so posited without searching for the object behind the imputation.” And so the question arises: “Apart from these imputed conventional labels, what world either ‘exists’ or ‘does not exist’?”

The problem is set aside for the time being, and the second principal phase of the discussion begins as follows: Granted that all things are merely posited through language and conceptual thought, then it is therefore obvious that any apprehension of an ultimately real object (*bhūtārtha*) must necessarily be erroneous. In section B.1, the self to be negated is defined as “an intrinsic nature not posited through the force of conceptual thought”; and this type is further subdivided for the purpose of analysis into two categories of selflessness: the selflessness of living beings (*puḍgalanairātmya*) and the selflessness of insentient things (*dharmanairātmya*).

Generally speaking, sections A.1, 2, and 3 present no particular difficulty, since the argument proceeds clearly from one point to the next and consists for the most part of a series of definitions. The conclusion of the entire argument through A.3 amounts to the assertion that the apprehension of any conceivable (that is, abstract or concrete) objective referent as intrinsically existent must always be made in error, simply because such an apprehension is invariably founded on an entity which is itself actually nothing more than a mental construct imputed through language in dependence on an endless regression of similarly “empty” causes and conditions. This is the emptiness of conventional truth, or the dependent origination of all conceivable things.

In section A.4, the ramifications of this understanding of conventional truth are developed in detail. Ignorance is defined as a technical term referring to the (mis)apprehension of the meanings of words and concepts as if they referred to entities which were ultimately real. This fundamental error of ontology as it occurs in conjunction with various other intellectual and emotional disorders is identified as the root of *samsāra*, and thereby as the principal cause of all forms of suffering. “With the destruction of ignorance, all the afflictions are destroyed.”

“To remove this ignorance, apart from understanding dependent origination as empty, we are instructed in the necessity of understanding the most profound meaning of dependent origination as it becomes manifest [in mundane experience].” Here I believe that we find an answer to the question posed in section A.4.

If mundane experience were judged solely by the criterion of ultimate truth, then “emptiness” would simply mean “nonexistence.” When language and conceptual thought do not refer to any real object(s), it would seem as though we are inevitably led to the conclusion that the world does not in fact exist. One may ask at this point—as Tson-kha-pa has already done: What world is there apart from names and concepts?

His answer to this question forms the subject of the final section of this essay, where he asserts that one need not assume either that the objective referent of a concept actually exists or that it does not. In fact, if one thoroughly uproots the notion of a self, then, according to Tson̄-kha-pa, it will become apparent that “selflessness” does not refer to either “existence” or to “nonexistence” in any absolute sense.

III. TRANSLATION FROM THE DBU-MA DGOÑS-PA RAB-GSAL¹⁰

According to this system, if one understands the mechanism through which all things are merely posited on the strength of conceptual thought, then one will easily recognize that any apprehension of an [intrinsically existent] reality is made in contradiction with this [mechanism]. Here two items must be explained:

- A. The mechanism through which all things are posited by conceptual thought; and
- B. The apprehension of an [intrinsically existent] reality which is made in contradiction with this [mechanism].

A. All Things Are Merely Posited on the Strength of Conceptual Thought

1. *The nature of inanimate things.* With respect to the first item, in the *Upālipariprechā*¹¹ it is written:

All these various lovely flower blossoms and this beautiful palace of shining gold are without any creator whatsoever, for they have simply been posited on the strength of conceptual thought. The entire world is only imagined through this process of conceptualization.

Here it is said that things are posited on the strength of conceptual thought. In many other [texts] as well we are told that all entities are merely imputations of the conceptualizing process, and that all of them are simply posited through mental constructs. In the *Yuktiṣaṣṭikā*¹² we find the following passage:

The Buddha has taught that the entire world is occasioned through ignorance, and therefore how can it be improper to say that this world is simply a concept?

The commentary to this passage explains that the phenomenal world is only an imputation of conceptual thought since it does not exist through its own intrinsic nature. Furthermore, it is stated in the *Catuhśataka*:¹³

When concepts do not exist, craving-attachment (*rāga*) and so forth too are without existence. Therefore, what wise man perceives [the world in terms of] a reified concept (*kalpana*) and a real object (*bhūtārtha*)?

The point is further elaborated in the commentary to this passage:¹⁴

The existence [of craving-attachment] rests upon the conceptualizing process, for when concepts do not exist then it too is deprived of existence. Like an [imaginary] snake imputed on a coiled rope, so without a doubt [craving-attachment] is not established through any intrinsic being.

In the quotation above, a “real object” would be an object supposed to be established through its own intrinsic being; and a reified concept is [a concept] generated with reference to [such an object]. Having provided an illustration to the effect that attachment and so forth are like the imputation of a snake on a rope, in the commentary it is said that all other things as well are similarly posited by conceptual thought. In the example, the objective referent does not appear clearly and the rope itself is mottled and coiled in the manner of a snake; therefore the thought arises that this is indeed a snake. At that time, neither within the rope as a composite whole nor among its parts is there sufficient cause to assign anything as the base for the distinguishing characteristic of “snake.”¹⁵ The snake in the rope is simply an imputation of the conceptualizing process.

2. *The nature of sentient creatures.* In exactly the same way, the notion of an “I” arises in dependence on the psychophysical constituents (*skandha-s*). There is insufficient cause to assign anything whatsoever as the base for the distinguishing characteristic of “I” either within the past, present, and future continuum of the group or among the individual constituents. This will be explained in detail later on. The point is that because there is absolutely no cause to apprehend anything as the base of an “I” which would be essence distinct from the individual constituents and the composite group [of the constituents], this “I” is merely posited by conceptual thought, and it does not intrinsically exist. In the *Ratnāvalī*¹⁶ it is written:

The person is neither earth, nor fire, nor water, nor air, nor space, nor consciousness, nor the composite of them all; and apart from these what person exists?

Here “real person,” “living being,” “I,” and “self” may be considered as synonyms for “person.” By “neither earth ... (up to) nor consciousness” is meant “neither any of the parts nor the group of the six elements [associated with] a living being,” and this is intended as a refutation of the positing of the collection of elements as a person. The last words [in the quotation] are a refutation of the positing of a person as in essence distinct from the elements.

The person is not accepted in any sense, and this includes the assertion of such a real person in the guise of fundamental mind (*ālayavijñāna*) and so forth. Here the author of this commentary (that is, Candrakīrti) is in complete accord with the teaching given by the Master (Nāgārjuna). If we understand the mechanism through which conceptual thought [formulates the notion of a] real person, [it will then become apparent that] all other things as well are posited by conceptual thought in a like manner. In the *Samādhirāja*¹⁷ it is said:

This understanding of the apperception of “self” should be applied through wisdom to all things.

And in the *Ratnāgunasamcayagāthā*:¹⁸

One should know all living beings to be exactly like the self, and as is the case with all living beings so it is with every [insentient] thing.

Finally, the point is clearly made in the *Ratnāvalī*:¹⁹

Just as the person is a composite of six elements and consequently is not real;
So each of the elements also is a composite and in actuality does not exist.

The meaning of the first line is that the person is imputed in dependence on the six elements. The meaning of the second line is that because nothing can exist without parts and a whole, so each element is also imputed in dependence on the composite of its several parts and therefore does not exist either in actuality or through any intrinsic being.

[The person] is nothing more than an imputation made in dependence on a composite of parts—though neither the composite whole nor the component parts may suitably be posited as the base of such a person, and apart from these two, there is no [other] entity to act as the base.

3. *The distinction between empirically real and empirically unreal things: Causal efficacy.* Considered from the standpoint of the mechanism through which they are posited by conceptual thought, a water pitcher [and other conventionally real entities] and the imputation of a snake on a rope are similar. However, as regards the [conventional] existence or nonexistence of the two, and their respective potentialities for efficacious behavior, and so forth, they are completely different. Also, with respect to the necessity or lack of necessity involved in formulating the appellations of both, and as to whether or not this process of designation is harmful, and so on, the two of them are absolutely dissimilar.

Every [conventionally real thing] posited by conceptual thought must fulfill its own function. Among those who have composed grammatical and exegetical commentaries, Buddhapālita, Śāntideva, and the present authority (Candrakīrti) are all in agreement that the system of the Master (Nāgārjuna) is extraordinary, and that this matter [of conventional truth based on causal efficacy] is the most profound subtlety of the Mādhyāmika view.

4. *The emptiness of all things.* In connection with this, in the *Ratnāvalī*²⁰ we find the following:

Material substances as well as space are nothing more than names, and when the primary elements are non-existent how can there be any concrete form? Even these names do not exist. Feeling, perception, the predispositions, and consciousness are all like the elements, and the self must also be similarly understood, for [in actuality] there is no such self [to be differentiated from] the six primary elements. . . . (and later) Apart from these imputed conventional labels, what world either "exists" or "does not exist"?

Ultimately, even names themselves do not exist; and at the conventional level there is nothing aside from that which is posited on the strength of these strictly conventional labels. That is to say, [all things] exist only insofar as they are imputed through names. If one thoroughly understands this, then one should also clearly understand that all things necessarily exist in dependence [on one

another]; that because they are dependently imputed and dependently produced none of them exists through its own intrinsic being; that there is no independent entity not [merely] posited on the strength of some particular conventional label; and that anything whatsoever posited as existent is so posited without searching for the object behind the imputation.

B. The Apprehension of an [Intrinsically Existent] Reality Is Made In Contradiction with the Mechanism Through Which All Things Are Merely Posited by Conceptual Thought

Now for the second item, concerning the apprehension of a being which is not posited merely on the strength of one of the above-mentioned conventional labels.

1. Definition of the type and its two principal divisions. This is the apprehension of existence in reality, as ultimately true, established in actuality, through its own essence, through its own unique distinguishing characteristic, or by virtue of its intrinsic being. The tendency embodied in such an apprehension is innate [to the conceptualizing mind], and the objective referent that is apprehended by it is judged to be real by one extreme of conceptual thought.²¹

[With regard to the Svātantrika position,] here we must acknowledge the necessity for discriminating between two interpretations of the phrase “ultimate truth,” which functions as a specific qualification enjoined upon the object of negation [in certain passages within the *sūtra*-s].²² The Svātantrika maintains that it is not possible for any epistemological object to be established in reality, [as ultimately true, or in actuality]; yet he does assert existence at the conventional level through its own essence, [its own unique distinguishing characteristic, and by virtue of its intrinsic being]. In the interest of those who for the time being simply do not possess the capability to fathom the extremely subtle nature of reality (*tattva*), [the Svātantrika position] affords a sophisticated expedient leading to [full comprehension of emptiness].

[The Svātantrika asserts] an objective referent, acting as the essence of all things, which is itself not dependent on any other conventional concept. By this is meant an intrinsic being not posited through the force of [conceptual thought]—which is just what we refer to as the “self” to be negated. The absence in a living being of any base for the qualification of this self is called “the selflessness of the person”; while the same with respect to the eye, ear, and all other [insentient] things is titled “the selflessness of things.”²³ Apprehension of the existence of an intrinsic being within the person and within [insentient] things is spontaneously regarded as the apprehension of two selves.²⁴ However, the commentary to the *Catuhśataka*²⁵ states the following:

Here that essence or intrinsic being of any entity which is not dependent on any other [conventional concept] is to be called the “self”; and its absence is the nonexistence of the self. According to the distinction drawn between persons and

[insentient] things, two [types of selflessness] are recognized: selflessness of phenomena, and selflessness of the person.

And from [the *Madhyamakāvātāra*]:²⁶

There are two classifications of selflessness: that of [insentient] things, and that of the person.

In this way, without having created any distinction between the objects of negation as though there were two distinct nonselves, it is suggested that we recognize a [dual] classification according to the thing that acts as the base [for the apprehension of the self].²⁷

2. *The innate apprehension of a real self within one's own continuum and within the continuum of other living beings: "I" and "mine."* (a) The support:²⁸ The original text²⁹ explicitly denies that the psychophysical constituents provide any actual support for the innate view of a real ego-corpus (*satkāyadr̥ṣṭi*)³⁰ occurring as the apprehension of an [ultimately real] self; while in the commentary the support for the [view] is stated to be the self imputed in dependence [on the constituents]. In addition to being the "I" which is the support for the thought of the [personal] "I," [this self] is utilized as the support for [the thought of] the unique person [external to the personal "I"].

(b) The apparent object of cognition: With reference to the apparent object of cognition the auto-commentary states:³¹

On account of the apprehension [of the psychophysical constituents] as "I" (*ahaṃkāra*), one goes on to imagine the existence of a self which does not in fact exist, and then he becomes strongly attached to this self as if it were [ultimately] real.

Thus [the apparent object of cognition] is the [dependently conceptualized] "I" apprehended as established in reality. Elsewhere in the commentary we find the following:²²

The view of a real ego-corpus is engaged with reference to apparent objects of cognition similar to the thoughts "I" and "mine," and is symptomatic of an afflicted mind.

A cognition which occurs as the thought "I" must naturally arise on the same support as does this innate view of a real ego-corpus. Therefore, that innate apprehension of a self established through its own unique distinguishing characteristic and associated with the person of a continuum other than one's own is certainly an innate apprehension of a real personal self, but it is not [an instance of] the view of a real ego-corpus.³³

The statement "lodged in apparent objects of cognition similar to the thoughts 'I' and 'mine'" is not an indication that the objective referents which act as the apparent objects of cognition in this manner are simply the apprehensions of the "I" and "mineness"³⁴—actually it indicates that the apparent objects of cog-

dition here are the apprehension of these two as if they existed by virtue of their own unique distinguishing characteristics.

The support of the view of a real ego-corpus occurring as the apprehension of [some entity] as “mine” as “mineness”—this ego-corpus is not [to be understood as] apprehended on the support of one’s own eye, and so forth; and the apparent object of cognition founded on this support is the apprehension of “mineness” as existent through its own unique distinguishing characteristic.

In the auto-commentary concerning the line [in the *Madhyamakāvātāra*] which reads “this is mine . . .”³⁵ we find the following passage:

The thought “this is mine” can be expressed in conjunction with attachment to apparent objects of cognition [in the form of] any entity other than that which provides the objective referent for the apprehension of [the constituents] as “I.”³⁶

The following question may arise: Is the apprehension of [some entity] as “mine” here identified as a sort of attachment generated in the thought “this is mine” and founded on the bases of the eye, and so forth? In this connection, the explanation is given that, having first perceived the eye and so forth as “mine,” one subsequently develops a strong attachment to this “mine-ness” as if it were [ultimately] real. This is not, however, an indication that the eye and so forth, in acting as bases for the distinguishing characteristic of “mineness,” are the support of [the apprehension]; indeed, if this were the case, then there would be no difference between the view of a real ego-corpus and the apprehension of a self within [insentient] things.³⁷

3. *The innate apprehension of a real self within insentient things.* (a) The support: The support of the innate apprehension of a self within [insentient] things is comprised of the physical and psychological constituents of oneself and others, including the eye, ear, nose [and other parts of the body]; as well as all other insentient things not included in the continuum of [a living being].

(b) The apparent object of cognition: This is as previously defined.³⁸

4. *Ignorance and its reversal.* The apprehension of these two selves is the ignorance which binds one to the wheel of *saṃsāra*. In the *Śūnyatāsaptati*³⁹ we find the following:

The Master taught that ignorance is the conceptualization of entities which are produced from causes and conditions as ultimately real; and that from [ignorance] arises the twelve-linked [series of dependent origination].

That is to say, the apprehension of “established in actuality” which is founded on entities is ignorance, the root of *saṃsāra*. Ignorance which is the apprehension of a self within the person is born from the apprehension of a self within [insentient] things. Therefore, it is said: “from ignorance arises the twelve-linked [series of dependent origination].”⁴⁰

The reversal of ignorance is necessarily the realization that what is appre-

hended through ignorance is [actually] empty and devoid of self. Again, from the *Śūnyatāsaptati*:⁴¹

With complete realization that when accurately perceived all things are empty, ignorance will no longer arise. This realization is an obstruction to ignorance, and thereby the twelve-linked [series of dependent origination] is brought to a halt.

And from the *Dharmadhātustava*:⁴²

Concepts of a future life will remain only so long as there is apprehension of “I” or “mine,” but if there is accurate perception of the two aspects of selflessness, then the seed of existence will be destroyed. . . . For a mind completely purified, all things are [seen to be] void of intrinsic being.

In the *Catuhśataka*⁴³ the following appears:

If the objective referent is seen as devoid of self, then the seed of existence will be destroyed.

And again from the same text:⁴⁴

With the destruction of ignorance all the afflictions are destroyed; and if there is perception of dependent origination, then ignorance will not arise. Therefore, great effort has been expended to explain this particular point.

The ignorance referred to in the above passages is identified as one of the three poisons; it is ignorance associated with the afflictions, because it occurs simultaneously with the apprehension of an “I.”

To remove this ignorance, apart from understanding the meaning of dependent origination as emptiness, we are instructed in the necessity of understanding the most profound meaning of dependent origination as it becomes manifest [in mundane experience].⁴⁵ Consequently, the author of this commentary states:

The self is rooted out by the meditator.⁴⁶

We are told that in order to comprehend selflessness, one must thoroughly refute the objective referent of the apprehension of the self.⁴⁷ When this particular objective referent is not completely refuted, the mind gravitates there and settles in that place, and such a mind is incapable of gaining access to [realization of] selflessness. The reason for this is that when the mind has perceived any objective referent, [there are only three possible consequences]:

- (a) The support is apprehended as a reality;
- (b) The support is apprehended as a nonreality; or,
- (c) The support is apprehended without making any distinction in terms of the two prior alternatives.

Even if the support is not apprehended as unreal it is not necessary that it be apprehended as real; and likewise, even if there is no perception of the two selves, it is not on this account necessary that there be perception of the absence of the

two selves—there are any number of cognitions which fall into the third category mentioned above.⁴⁸

Once we have recognized in our own continuum the two apprehensions of a self, we must proceed to establish that the very base of the error (that is, the objective referent) in our own [cognition] does not exist as it is apprehended. If we do not take this step, any attempt at constructing a refutation of the views of others will never get to the point: it is as if we were searching on open marshland for the tracks of a thief who has escaped into the forest.⁴⁹ However, if we correctly identify this apprehension of [an intrinsically existent] reality for what it is, then we will understand that a great number of concepts exist which are free from the dual apprehension of a self. In this way, we will be prepared to refute all those who, through their misconceptions, want to deny by means of logical examination into ultimate reality every objective referent apprehended by conceptual thought.⁵⁰

NOTES

1. C. Gudmunsen, *Wittgenstein and Buddhism* (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1977).
2. Richard Robinson, *Early Mādhyamika in India and China* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967).
3. Frederick J. Streng, *Emptiness—A Study in Religious Meaning* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1967).
4. Douglas D. Daye, "Major Schools of the Mahāyāna: Mādhyamika," in *Buddhism: A Modern Perspective*, ed. Charles Prebish (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1975), pp. 77–96.
5. Gudmunsen, *Wittgenstein and Buddhism*, p. 8.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Mudhyamakāvataira* of Candrakīrti (*kārika*-s and *bhūṣya* in the Tibetan trans.), vol. 9, ed. L. de La Vallée Poussin (St. Petersburg: Bibliotheca Buddhica, 1908), VI, 59cd.
8. Tsoñ-kha-pa, *Dbu-ma dgoñs-pa rab-gsal* (Sarnath, Uttar Pradesh, India: The Pleasure of Elegant Sayings Press, 1973).
9. Concerning the technical term "base" (*gzhi āśraya*), see below, note 28.
10. The essay translated here constitutes pp. 137–144 of the *Dbu-ma dgoñs-pa rab-gsal*, a section from Tsoñ-kha-pa's discussion on *Mudhyamakāvataira*, VI, 7.
11. *Vinaya-viniścaya-Upāli-pariprechā*, trans. and ed. by Pierre Python (Paris: Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1973), verse 69 and 70a from the Tibetan.
12. *Yuktiṣaṣṭikā* of Nāgārjuna, ed. in Sanskrit and Tibetan and trans. by S. Yamaguchi in *Chūgan Bukkyo Renko* (Kyoto, 1944), pp. 31–109 (*kārika* 37 and the accompanying commentary).
13. *Catuhśataka* of Āryadeva, Sanskrit and Tibetan texts with copious extracts from the commentary of Candrakīrti, reconstructed and ed. by Vidhushekhara Bhattacharya (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati Series, no. 2, 1931), VIII, 178 and the accompanying commentary.
14. *Ibid.*
15. In this instance a legitimate base would have to be an entity that possessed all of the attributes normally predicated to a snake (biting, hissing, etcetera), whereas the snake in the rope is nothing more than a collection of circumstantial evidence which misleads the viewer into believing that he sees something that is in fact not present.
16. *Ratnāvalī* of Nāgārjuna, T 4158, I, 80. The work has been translated into English by J.

Hopkins, *The Precious Garland and the Song of the Four Mindfulnesses* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975).

17. *Samādhirājasūtra*, ed. by P. L. Vaidya (Darbanga, Bihar, India: The Mithila Institute of Post-Graduate Studies and Research in Sanskrit Learning, 1961), XII. 7.

18. As provided by Tsoñ-kha-pa, the citation here is simply to *Phags-pa sduḍ-pa*, which I interpret as an abbreviated reference to the *Ratnagūṇasamcayagāthā*; however I have not been able to locate these lines.

19. *Op.cit.*, I. 81.

20. *Op.cit.*, I. 99 and 100; II. 114bcd.

21. This is the first of the two "extreme views" (*antagrāhadṛṣṭi*) represented as (1) eternalism (*sāsvatadrṣṭi*), and (2) nihilism (*ucchedadrṣṭi*) (Confer *Abhidharmakośa*, trans. by L. de la Vallée Poussin (Bruxelles, Inst. Belge des Haute Etude Chinoises, 1971), chap. 9, tome V., p. 270).

22. Both the Prāsaṅgika-mādhyamika and the Svātantrika-mādhyamika accept the concept of the two truths as an exegetical device for determining which passages within the *sūtra*-s are definitive (*neyārtha*), or "ultimately true," and which are to be interpreted (*nīārtha*) because they do not represent the ultimate truth (*paramārtha*). The two sects disagree in their understanding of the expression "ultimate truth."

23. According to the Mādhyamika, both types of "self" are causally inefficacious and, therefore, like the snake mistakenly imputed on a rope, they are "real" neither from the ultimate nor the conventional point of view.

24. The technical term "self" (*ātman*) is used to refer to any concept involving a variety of substance ontology, whether of a sentient "soul" or "spirit," or of an insentient "thing-in-itself." The supposed distinction between these two types of concepts is considered to be trivial by the Mādhyamika: they are both merely instances of "eternalism" (confer note 21). The real objective referent posited by a reified concept is regarded as a reflection of the same innate tendency, whether it appears in sentient or insentient form.

25. I have not located these lines in Candrakīrti's commentary.

26. I have not located these lines either in the *Madhyamaka-avatāra* or in the *bhāṣya*.

27. See note 24, above.

28. It would be helpful at this point to clarify the meaning of a few technical terms. "Support" (*dmigs-pa; ālambana*) and "apparent object of cognition" (*rnam-pa; ākāra*) are concerned with the cognitive-perceptive event and therefore only with conventional truth. Whereas the particular collocation of elements which underlies a perception is the "support" of that perception, the "apparent object of cognition" is the appearance that this particular arrangement of elements assumes in being perceived under a specific set of conditions. Contrast with these two the terms "base" or "ground" (*gzi; āśraya*) and "distinguishing characteristic" (*mtshan; lakṣaṇa*). As strictly analytical terms in the metalanguage of philosophy, these words do not refer to the cognitive event, but rather to the conventional objective referent abstracted from our experience of it. The support of every perception is by definition always an empirically real entity, and therefore "base" and "support" refer to the same thing in two different roles. When the apparent object of cognition coincides with the support as it is (that is, as a valid conventional truth), there has occurred an accurate perception (*yah-dag mthoñ-ba*): in such a case a rope is perceived for what it is at the conventional level – a rope (and not a snake). However, as an object of philosophical analysis abstracted from the cognitive event (that is, a "base"), the rope is itself nothing more than a designation made in dependence on a specific conjunction of elements (causes and conditions) which act as its distinguishing characteristics. And apart from its distinguishing characteristics, no base can be found.

29. *Madhyamakāvatāra*, (for example, VI. 142–145).

30. "View of a real ego-corpus" (*jig-ṭhsoḡ-la lta-bu; satkāyadrṣṭi*) is a technical expression specifically denoting the apprehension of a personal self, that is, the apprehension of an "I" as opposed to the apprehension of any other sentient self external to the apprehending subject. The expanded form of the expression reads: *jig-ṭhsoḡ-la lta-bu 'ri 'ritse-mo ṅi-su niḥo-ba*; and in Sanskrit: *viṃśati-śikhāra-samudgatāḥ satkāya-drṣṭi-sāilāḥ*. Although there is a slight literal discrepancy between the Tibetan gloss and the Sanskrit original, both refer to the "twenty towering peaks of the

mountain which is the view of a real (abiding) self within transitory, composite phenomena." The twenty aspects of the false view of a self are actually four types of wrong views applied to each of the five psychophysical constituents. These four basic types, as associated with form (*rūpa*), are as follows: (1) the self is form, like a sovereign; (2) form qualifies the self, like an ornament; (3) form is possessed by the self, like a slave; and (4) form contains the self, like a vessel (confer *Mahāvīryūputti*, ed. by R. Sakaki (Kyoto: Shingonshu Kyoto Daigaku, 1925, no. 208). Also see: *Abhidharmakośa*, V, 7, and L. de La Vallée Poussin's lengthy note on the term in his *L'Abhidharmakośa de Vasubandhu*, Tome IV, pp. 15–17).

31. I have not been able to locate these lines.

32. *Op.cit.*, p. 234, line 1.

33. This is simply a matter of definition (see note 24).

34. The concept of "self" which arises in conjunction with the psychophysical constituents is empirically real according to the criteria established in section I.c. It serves as the support, however, for two very different apparent objects of cognition—one which coincides with the strictly functional reality of the "I" and its possessions, and a second which represents these as intrinsically existent entities divorced from language and conceptual thought.

35. *Op.cit.*, I. 3.

36. A person cannot logically consider himself to be in possession of his own innermost self, since this would imply a fracture of the ego into subject and object.

37. The concept of "mineness" is a mere reflex of the concept of "I," and its function is to demarcate the range or define the objects possessed by the "I." Both of these two (that is, "mineness" and "I") are to be distinguished by definition from the concept of a self associated with insentient things.

38. See section B. 2. (b): The apparent object of cognition is the support apprehended as intrinsically existent.

39. *Sūnyatāsūptatikārika-nāma*, T. 3827, verse 64.

40. One begins by attributing existential status to the various things which are posited through language and conceptual thought, and once this is done, he is then forced into constructing a substance ontology in order to account somehow for the nature of this existence. At this point, the only legitimate question has become: Do these things exist in their own right or is existence conferred upon them through the force of another intrinsically existent agent?

41. *Op. cit.*, verse 66.

42. *Dharmadhātustava*, T. 1118, verse 64.

43. *Catuhṣatākaśāstrakārika*, T. 3846, XIV. 25cd.

44. *Ibid.*, VI. 10cd–11.

45. That is, one must understand the relationship between the ultimate truth (*paramārtha-satya*) of emptiness and the conventional truth (*saṃvṛti-satya*) of mundane experience.

46. *Madhyamakāvātāra*, VI. 120cd.

47. Any object is "refuted" in this sense by clearly understanding that it exists merely as a designation assigned in dependence on a specific collocation of other similarly "unreal" (that is, nonreferring) designations.

48. It is not necessary to attribute either absolute reality or absolute unreality to the meaning of a word or concept, since any question as to whether or not the objective referent posited by a word or concept is real is an empirical matter to be determined on the basis of its causal efficacy or lack of causal efficacy in the sociolinguistic context (*loka-saṃvṛti*) where the word or concept is used.

49. If one argues directly against the concept of "self" then his opponent invariably assumes that such an argument necessarily implies a position entailing the nonexistence of phenomena even at the conventional level, while in fact these two are the very extremes of eternalism and nihilism that seem to epitomize the trap of conceptual thought when it is applied to matters lying outside the range of its authority. The metaphor here is obscure, but I would tentatively propose the following interpretation: "Self" and "nonself" are simply the tracks or absence of tracks on the open marshland which is the meaning of a word or concept, or the objective referent posited by the use of a word or concept.

50. On this, see for example *The Garland of Tenets*, Prāsaṅgika section:

These days there are those who are immensely proud of their sophisticated views. They say that all objective things are simply erroneous appearances; and thus having perceived [all things] as utterly devoid of existence like the son of a barren woman, these people hold that the most superior practice entails non-attention to anything. They have not so much as caught the scent of the Prāsaṅgika. (Le "Grub-mtha rnam-bzag rin-chen phren-ba", ed. with an introd. by Katsumi Mitnaki, in *Zinbum: Memoirs of the Research Institute for Humanistic Studies* (Kyoto: Kyoto University Press, 1977).

The complete text of the *Garland of Tenets* has been translated by Hopkins and Sopa in their *Practice and Theory of Tibetan Buddhism* (London: Rider & Co. Ltd., 1976).

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