

# Chapter 27

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## Candrakīrti's *Madhyamakāvatārabhāṣya* 6.86–97

A Madhyamaka Critique of Vijñānavāda Views of  
Consciousness

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Candrakīrti (c. 600–650) is one of the most highly regarded Indian Buddhist philosophers. Within the Tibetan tradition, Candrakīrti's understanding of Madhyamaka is considered authoritative, and the *Madhyamakāvatāra*, or *Entry into the Middle Way*, is routinely consulted as the definitive introduction to his ideas. In conformity with the mnemonic form of classical Sanskrit philosophical literature, the basic text of the *Madhyamakāvatāra* is composed in a series of metered verses (*kārikā*-s); each of these aphoristic verses is then accompanied by a commentary (*bhāṣya*) that unpacks its meaning in the larger context of the whole. This format is reflected in the excerpt I have translated here.

The *Madhyamakāvatāra* is divided into ten chapters, each one dealing with a particular element of Buddhist training. Of these, the most important are generosity, morality, patience, courage, and meditation. It is well to remember that in India the study of philosophy was never an entirely intellectual affair. Theoretical arguments were invariably linked to broader soteriological concerns. Nevertheless, for present purposes, chapter 6 is of particular interest, since it is here that Candrakīrti provides a detailed discussion of key points of Madhyamaka doctrine. Here we find an analysis of causality, a lengthy refutation of various concepts of “self,” and a basic presentation of the system of the so-called two truths: the conventional truth of everyday affairs, and the profound, liberating truth of “emptiness.” In the passage of the *Madhyamakāvatāra* translated here, extracted from chapter 6 (verses 86–97), Candrakīrti addresses the problem of consciousness.

Specifically, he directs his remarks toward a particular form of Buddhist idealism.

Indian idealism reached its apex in the sophisticated philosophical system of Advaita Vedānta and in the Mahāyāna Buddhist Vijñānavāda, which seems to have viewed matter as an epiphenomenon of consciousness (*vijñāna*) or mind (*citta*). It is this view that serves as the target of Candrakīrti's arguments in the material translated here. His critique of the Vijñānavāda position may be understood as a kind of dualism, but it is fundamentally unlike both the dualism that preceded him in India and the Cartesian dualism that continues to shape the premises of Anglo-American philosophical thinking. The origins of Indian idealism and of the peculiar form of dualism adopted by Candrakīrti predate the advent of Buddhism. To appreciate Candrakīrti's arguments with the Vijñānavāda, it is helpful to have a rudimentary knowledge of the literature of this early period.

The roots of Indian dualism may be found in the early Upaniṣads (c. 800–500 B.C.E.), where consciousness is described as the “witness” (*sākṣin*), the detached and entirely passive observer of the world. In this view, consciousness is pure awareness—a kind of mirror—in which, or for which, the world appears. It is essential to understand that “the world” here includes not only physical objects of the five senses but also literally everything that Cartesian dualism takes as the subjective phenomena (“mental objects”) revealed exclusively through introspection—thoughts, memories, and so forth. Consciousness, as here defined, cannot easily be assimilated under the familiar Cartesian rubrics as either subjective or objective. From a Cartesian perspective, the Upanisadic witness is literally nothing, for it is unlocatable in terms of either mind or matter. And yet consciousness or awareness—this invisible no-thing—is an essential and indisputable presence in the immediate experience of both mental and physical objects. The witness can only appear as the reflection of what it is not, and this appearance is, oddly, all that there is to consciousness. This was the position eventually adopted in the dualism of classical Sāṃkhya—one of the six systems of orthodox Hindu philosophy.

Indian idealism also has its origins in the Upaniṣads, where it developed in part, perhaps, as a monistic response to a problem seemingly inherent to Upanisadic dualism, namely, the difficulty in presenting a satisfying account of the interaction between these two fundamentally distinct and independent realities of the observer and the observed. In full-blown Sāṃkhya dualism, there is an associated soteriological problem, for liberation from suffering is said to be found in the total severing of consciousness from its contents: It is a state of “isolation” (*kaivalya*) in which consciousness, though no longer conscious of anything, still somehow intrinsically exists. Upanisadic idealism understands the material world as an illusion (*māya*) rooted in the mind. However, as is the case with modern neuroscientific materialism, the solution offered by this form of Indian monism carries with it a new set of problems. Not only does it appear to contradict immediate

experience by denying the reality of external, physical objects but also it raises the question of how unreal “material epiphenomena” can influence either thought (“mental objects”) or pure consciousness (the “witness”).

Candrakīrti's solution is both simple and profound. He rightly identifies the root problem of monism (whether materialist or idealist) and Upanisadic styles of dualism as one of reification. It is not possible to present a plausible account of the causal relationships that define immediate experience when any sort of inherent existence is attributed to mind, matter, or both (however they may be defined). For Candrakīrti, as for classical Sāṃkhya, consciousness is ultimately defined only in the context of its relationship with a subjective (mental) and objective (material) “other.” But for Candrakīrti it is equally true that this other, the observed, is defined exclusively *as it appears* to the observer. He is explicit—and adamant—about this point. Not only is consciousness an unavoidable “nothingness” in our experience of self and world; mental and physical objects are as well a similarly unavoidable “nothingness” in consciousness. It is in the nature of *both* the observer *and* the observed to appear as what they are not, for neither exists outside of their relationship with the other. They are unreifiable, unlocatable, “empty” of intrinsic being, and entirely dependent on each other for both their existence and for any meaning they might (or might not) possess. At the level of immediate experience, both observer and observed are equally real; outside of this functionally determined nexus of relations—that is, from an entirely theoretical perspective—any notion of either existence or meaning is incoherent.

Candrakīrti's version of dualism does not embody a metaphysical position. Rather, it is grounded in an empirical appeal to our everyday experience, including the experience of thoughts and sensations that appear in the course of normal introspection. Nor does it attempt to explain away the mystery of immediate experience through any form of reductionism. On the contrary, the effect of his arguments is to heighten one's sense of wonder and one's capacity for living without recourse to absolute claims of any kind. Such arguments are considered to define a theoretical position only insofar as one's powers of empirical observation have not been adequately sharpened through sustained contemplative practice. In fact, the soteriological goal for Candrakīrti is articulated in precisely these terms: the direct yogic experience of the “selflessness” or “emptiness” of both consciousness and its contents—their lack of inherent existence—is itself liberation from the suffering caused by clinging to reified categories of subject and object.

Candrakīrti begins by addressing a position that attributes to thought some sort of causal agency in the experience of external, material appearances. Then, in the commentary to 95cd, he briefly comments on a doctrine of “Buddha-nature” (*tathāgatagarbha*) very similar to the ancient Upanisadic notion of consciousness as witness. Although his critique encompasses both views, he does not clearly distinguish between them, nor does he elaborate on the relationship between thinking (mind as agent) and pure awareness

(mind as passive observer). He is not interested in presenting any overarching theory of his own. Candrakīrti's remarks here do, however, make it clear that neither thought nor pure awareness is to be viewed as ultimately real.

Translation: *Madhyamakāvatārabhāṣya* 6.86–97,  
Verses and Commentary

(86) Non-Buddhist philosophers speak in their various texts about things like a “person.” Seeing that none of these functions as an agent, the Conqueror taught that the agent in the context of everyday experience is mind alone.

“Non-Buddhist philosophers” is merely a general term that also encompasses Buddhists who believe in things like a “person.” In a way, they are not really Buddhists, because—like the non-Buddhists—they have not correctly understood the teaching. This is why they are referred to by the same designation.

Inquire of the various philosophical schools, of the Sāṃkhyas, the Aulūkyas, and the Nirgranthas, with their absolutist doctrines of a person, of aggregates, and so forth: Who speaks of that which transcends existence and nonexistence?

It is the buddhas who offer the profound, ambrosial teaching that transcends existence and nonexistence: Know that only this is the Dharma.

Those who are firmly attached to belief in the aggregates and so forth must be considered as non-Buddhists. “In their various texts...” means “in their systems of tenets.” What this indicates is that “non-Buddhists” are characterized by the fact that they attribute agency to the aggregates and so forth. Because samsara has no beginning, all kinds of theories have been and will be proposed. So it is that at present the Jains and others can be found teaching of aggregates and other such doctrines. The Blessed One did not see any person or other such thing as an agent, and so he taught that the agent in the context of everyday experience is mind alone. This is the meaning of the scripture, and this meaning is exhausted in its negation of any *other* agent: the word “only” has no capacity to negate the objective component of knowledge (*jñeya*).

Having shown in this way that the external object is not negated, the author goes on to make the same point through another argument:

(87) Just as “he [whose knowledge of] reality is expansive” is referred to as “Buddha,” so the [*Laṅkāvatāra*] *sūtra* substitutes “mind alone” for “mind alone is preeminent in the context of everyday experience.” The meaning of this scripture is not to be understood as a negation of form.

Even though the word “Buddha” doesn’t actually appear in conjunction with the words “reality” and “expansive,” nevertheless this meaning is taken for granted. Similarly, the scripture asserts that the triple world is mind alone in order to make the point that mind alone is preeminent and to negate any other such preeminent factor. When the scripture says “mind alone exists; form does not,” this is taught to deny the importance of form and so forth, not to negate their very existence. . . .

(88) If he intended to deny the existence of objective reality when he said that [the world] is mind alone, then why would the *mahātman* declare, in the same text, that mind is produced from delusion (*moha*) and volitional action (*karman*)?

In the *Daśabhūmikasūtra*, consciousness is said to have as its causes spiritual ignorance and the prenatal dispositions (*saṃskāra*-s). Therefore, it does not exist by virtue of any intrinsic distinguishing characteristic. If it did, then it would not be dependent on spiritual ignorance or on the prenatal dispositions; but it is dependent on them. Consequently, consciousness is definitely not intrinsically existent. Like the hair and so forth apprehended by someone afflicted with ophthalmia, it exists when the necessary conditions are present to create such erroneous perception, and it ceases to exist when the requisite causes are no longer present.

As it is said in the same text:

The bodhisattva closely examines the way in which dependent arising unfolds. He reflects in the following way: Spiritual ignorance is the failure to understand things deeply; prenatal dispositions are the fruit of volitional action shaped by spiritual ignorance; consciousness is the first manifestation of mind resting on the prenatal dispositions; name and form are the four aggregates of clinging that arise with consciousness; the six sense faculties grow out of name and form; sense contact is sensual union of sense organ, object, and cognition; feeling emerges along with sense contact; thirst is immersion in feeling; clinging is the magnification of thirst; existence is passionate volitional action flowing forth from clinging; emergence of the aggregates is birth, issuing forth from volitional action; old age is the maturing of the aggregates; death is the breaking up of the aggregates in old age. [187.8] . . .

[189.5] In this way consciousness is established in dependence on spiritual ignorance and the prenatal dispositions. So, to be sure, consciousness exists in the presence of the conditions of error. But how does it happen that consciousness does not exist? It is explained as follows:

The prenatal dispositions are destroyed with the destruction of spiritual ignorance; when spiritual ignorance, the condition for prenatal dispositions, does not exist, the foundation for prenatal dispositions is no longer present. When the prenatal dispositions are destroyed,

consciousness ceases to exist; when the prenatal dispositions, the condition for consciousness, does not exist, consciousness is no longer present.

Similarly, he also reflects in the following way:

Conditioned things arise from coalescence, not from separation. They arise from joining together, not from pulling apart. When I understand how conditioned things come into being through all sorts of grievous faults, I will end that coalescence and joining together. However, in order to work for the spiritual ripening of sentient beings, I will not completely destroy the prenatal dispositions. When the Son of the Conquerors reflects in this way, understanding how conditioned things are associated with grievous faults, how they lack any essence, how they neither arise nor pass away....

What sensible person would look at a passage from this same [*Daśabhūmikasūtra*] and imagine that consciousness exists as an independent thing (*vastutaḥ*)? A notion like this is nothing more than dogmatic opinion. It follows that the expression “mind only” serves only to clarify that mind is the most significant element [in experience]. This text should not be understood to assert that there is no objective form (*rūpa*).

The following aphorism explains the fundamental importance of mind:

(89) Mind fabricates both the sentient and insentient worlds. It is said that the entire universe is born from volitional action, but without mind such action would not exist.

Here the “sentient world” is made up of sentient beings who receive their individual character on the basis of their own volitional actions and afflictions. The “insentient world”—from a whirlwind all the way up to the palace of the Akaniṣṭha gods—is fabricated by the common actions of those same [sentient beings]. All such diverse creatures as, for example, a peacock—even to the eyes on his feathers—are produced by their particular actions, not by action in common. Lotus flowers and other [insentient things] are produced by the common actions of all sentient beings. Other things are to be similarly understood. As it is said:

Even the Black Mountains are produced, over time, under the force of actions taken by sentient beings, as are the razor-sharp leaves in hell and the glittering jewels on heavenly trees.

So it is that the entire universe is produced from volitional action, but such action is entirely dependent on the mind. Only action associated with mind accumulates retribution, and without the mind there is no action. Mind, and no other, is the preeminent cause of the creation of the universe. In the commentarial literature, mind—not objective form—is established as fundamentally important. Why is this?

(90a–b) Even though objective form does indeed exist, it is not, like mind, an agent.

This means that objective form is inert.

(90c–d) Therefore, denying any other agent besides mind is not the same as negating objective form altogether.

Some people take [the Sāṃkhya] idea of “matter” (*pradhāna*) and such things as agent, others believe it is mind, but everyone agrees that objective form is not an agent. To prevent *pradhāna* and so forth from being taken as agent, it is explained that they do not have any such characteristic. Seeing that it has the capacity to serve as agent, one declares that mind alone is the agent, and in doing so one gains the high ground in any debate concerning the agency of *pradhāna* and so forth. It is as if two kings desire power in a single land, and one of the two rivals is expelled while the other assumes control of the country. No matter who wins, the citizens are indispensable and would suffer no harm. So it is here, because objective form is indispensable to both, it suffers no loss. One can certainly maintain that objective form exists. Therefore, continuing in the same manner, the text declares:

(91) Within the context of everyday affairs, all five psychophysical constituents taken for granted in the world do exist. However, none of the five appears to a yogi who pursues illuminating knowledge of reality.

Therefore, seeing as this is so,

(92a–b) If form does not exist, then do not cling to the existence of mind; and if mind exists, then do not cling to the nonexistence of form.

When, for some reason, one does not admit the existence of form, then the existence of both is equally unreasonable and one must admit the nonexistence of mind, as well. And when one admits the existence of mind, then it is necessary to admit the existence of form, for both are conventionally real. The same conclusion is reached in the textual tradition:

(92c–d) The Buddha rejected both of them in the scriptures on perfect wisdom, and taught them both in the Abhidharma.

Form and the other five psychophysical constituents are all taught in the Abhidharma, making distinctions between their general and particular characteristics. And in the scriptures on perfect wisdom, all five are equally denied: “O Subhūti, objective form is empty of inherent existence.” The same is said concerning the others, including consciousness. This is established both in scripture and through recourse to reason.

(93a–b) You destroy the relationship of the two truths, and even then your “real thing” (*vastu*) [i.e. mind] is not established, because it has been refuted.

In arguing that consciousness alone exists, without objective form, you destroy the relationship between conventional and ultimate truth as it has been explained. And even when you have destroyed this relationship between the two truths, your absolute reality will not be established. Why not? Once the reality [of form] is denied, your efforts [to establish consciousness] are pointless.

(93c–d) It would be better to hold, in conformity with this relationship, that in reality nothing arises; the arising of things is merely conventional.

[The Vijñānavādin] responds: Even if the meaning of this scripture is as you suggest, still there is another text that insists that mind alone exists. There it says:

Although external objects appear, they do not exist; mind appears in various forms. I declare that mind alone appears as the body, objects of enjoyment, and place.

By “body” the text refers to the eye and other sense organs. “Objects of enjoyment” refers to visual forms and other sense objects. “Place” refers to the world as a location. Since there is no external object apart from mind, it is consciousness alone that arises taking the appearance of body, objects of enjoyment, and place. Place and so forth manifest in the form of sense objects, as if they were external objects existing apart from consciousness. Therefore the triple world is mind alone.

So as to show that this scripture as well requires interpretation, the author says,

(94a–b) Where a scripture declares that there is no external object and that mind (*citta*) alone appears as various things,

This scripture requires interpretation:

(94c–d) the refutation of form is provisional, directed specifically at those who are overly attached to it.

The meaning of such a text is strictly provisional. There are those who have lost themselves in clinging or anger or pride that is rooted in an extreme attachment to form; such people commit grievous errors and fail to cultivate merit or understanding. It is for these people, who are clinging, that the Blessed One taught “mind alone” even though it is not actually so. He did this in order to destroy the afflictions that are rooted in material form.

But how do you know this scripture is provisional, and not definitive?

Through both textual evidence and reason. The Master has said precisely this:

(95a–b) The Master has said that this [scripture] is of strictly provisional meaning; reason [as well] dictates it is of provisional meaning.



Not only is this scripture of provisional meaning, but also

(95c–d) This text makes it clear that other scriptures of this type are of provisional meaning.

And if one inquires which scriptures are of “of this type,” there is the following passage from the *Saṅdhinirmocanasūtra*, explaining the “three natures”—the imaginary, the dependent, and the perfected:

The imaginary is nonexistent, only what is dependent exists.

And likewise:

Repository Consciousness is profound and subtle, the seed of all existence, flowing like a river. It would be inappropriate to think of it as a “subject”—I have not taught such a thing even to people who understand very little...

Once again,

Just as a physician dispenses medicine to one patient or another, so the Buddha also teaches “mind alone” to living beings.

This text makes clear the point about provisional meaning. Similarly [in the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra*]:

The Blessed One has spoken in the scriptures about a fundamental level of awareness (*tathāgatagarbha*), describing it as naturally brilliant, fundamentally pure, bearing the thirty-two marks [of a Buddha], immanent in the bodies of all sentient beings. It is described as a jewel of immense value wrapped in the soiled cloth of psychophysical aggregates, elements of sensation (*dhātus*, and sense organs along with their objects (*āyatana*s)). It was further described as dominated by clinging, antipathy, and delusion and soiled by the filth of conceptualization. Nevertheless, it is permanent, firm, and eternal. How is it, Blessed One, that this talk of Buddha-nature is not equivalent to that talk of non-Buddhists concerning a self? Non-Buddhists as well, Blessed One, teach about the self as permanent, as lacking agency, devoid of qualities, omnipotent, and indivisible. The Blessed One responds as follows: Mahāmati, my teaching about Buddha-nature is not at all equivalent to the talk of non-Buddhists concerning a self. Why not? The fully awakened saints, the Tathāgatas, teach about Buddha-nature as emptiness, as the limit of existence (*bhūtaḥkoṭi*), as nirvana, as unborn, uncaused, unceasing, and so forth. Although the supreme Buddha-nature is not susceptible to reification (*nirvikalpa*) or any sort of binding imagery (*nirbhāsa*), still they teach about it in this way so as to mitigate the apprehension of those who are unfamiliar with the teaching of selflessness. Mahāmati, no present or future bodhisattva would take this for a “self.” Just as, Mahāmati, a potter

fashions a variety of pots from one mound of clay particles by using his hands, his skill, a stick, water, a string, and his own strength, so, Mahāmati, the same selflessness of phenomena that is absolutely free from all conceptualized distinguishing characteristics is taught by the Tathāgatas through a variety of synonymous words and phrases—either through instruction on Buddha-nature or on selflessness—and as with the potter, through application of diverse forms of wisdom and skillful means. Mahāmati, this is how they teach about Buddha-nature to those whose thoughts are immersed in views concerning the idea of a self. In this way, the thinking of such people will come under the influence of [teachings on] emptiness, selflessness, and impermanence and they will be able more swiftly to obtain perfect awakening.

And in the same scripture,

Mahāmati, the teaching that permeates the scriptures of all the Buddhas is characterized by emptiness, nonarising, nonduality, and lack of any distinguishing characteristic.

After having shown that scriptures of this type—all of which are said by Vijñānavādins to be of definitive meaning—are of provisional meaning, the author points out that reason as well clarifies their provisional meaning:

(96) The Buddhas teach that the subject, or knower (*jñātṛ*), may easily be dispensed with once the object of knowledge, or the known (*jñeya*), is no longer present. For this reason they begin by refuting the object of knowledge, for, when it is no longer present, refutation of the subject is already accomplished.

The Blessed Buddhas introduce novices to the absence of intrinsic existence through a series of graduated stages, or steps. Those who have prepared themselves through meritorious action easily penetrate to the essence of this teaching (*dharmatā*), because meritorious action is a means for doing so. This is why generosity and other forms of ethical behavior are extolled as fundamental. Similarly, the Blessed One refutes the object of knowledge first, because this serves as a means for entering into an understanding of selflessness. Those who understand how the object of knowledge is devoid of self will progress with comparative ease to an understanding of how the subject, or knower, similarly lacks any self-contained existence. Some of those who understand the object's lack of intrinsic existence will immediately comprehend the similar lack of any intrinsic existence in the subject; others will reach this understanding with only a bit more guidance. This is why the object is refuted first. Wise people should apply the same principles in their interpretation of other [texts].

(97) Based on an understanding of this hermeneutical approach, one goes on to apply it to other texts. If the purpose of a scripture is to teach something other than reality, then it is of provisional meaning

and must be interpreted through critical reflection. On the other hand, if its purpose is to teach emptiness, then its meaning should be understood as definitive.

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