

A Concise Analysis of Different Approaches to Reality **Khenpo Chodrak Tenpel Rinpoche**

It is usual for sentient beings in this world to struggle and make plans so that they can be happy and keep suffering to a minimum. However, what sentient beings actually take to be pain and pleasure and what sentient beings actually do to avoid suffering varies widely. As a result, there are many approaches and many religions.

Some take what is tangible and apparent as the standard by which they judge happiness or suffering. Mere fame and wealth and so forth are seen as "happiness"; any manifest, undesirable experience is seen as "suffering".

In terms of external environments, people make every effort to achieve comfort for themselves and avoid pain. People work hard to develop their countries and raise the standard of living. Even so, it is clear that real happiness is not achieved, in spite of all this effort.

Some believe that a god or divine being has created pain and pleasure. They present many ways to please the god or placate the divine being. These approaches maintain that the causes for both pain and pleasure are external to oneself.

The Buddhist approach, however, maintains that the actual causes of pain and pleasure are dependent on oneself and that, unless one is free from samsāra, one cannot possibly be free from suffering.

As to the methods that free one from samsāra, there are varying points of view. The main schools are those of the Vaibhāsikas and the Sautrāntikas of the Sravaka tradition, and the Cittamātrins and the Mādhyamikas of the Māhāyana tradition.

Here follows a brief account of the supreme Madhyamaka, which sets forth the profound and definitive meanings of the Buddhist teachings.

When examining and analyzing the nature of samsāra, one comes to recognize that samsāra is a state of confusion that does not have, and never has had, any reality. Due to confusion, the notion of reality (and its consequences) emerges. The confused mind takes beings and things as real; that is, it ascribes reality to that which has no reality, just as appearances in a dream are taken to be real. But "realness" cannot be found in the outer, perceived objects and cannot be found in the inner, perceiving mind. Mind and things have no substantiality; they are like reflections in a mirror.

Things are made up of parts. These parts can themselves be dissected into smaller and smaller parts, and these again into parts, down to atoms. Even those atoms can be split into smaller parts in an infinite progression. Thus no single entity, no "thing" can be found.

The many parts that make up a thing taken together are also not the "thing". Since each of these parts themselves cannot be found to be "real", the sum total of unreal parts cannot constitute a reality.

Mind manifests moment by moment. These moments can be divided into past, present, and future. Each of these moments can again be divided into past, present, and future in an infinite progression. Therefore, no single entity called "mind" can be found.

The many moments that make up "mind" taken together are also not mind. Since each of these moments cannot be found to be real, the sum total of unreal parts cannot constitute a reality.

Thus, both objects and mind are seen to be empty of true existence.

This empty mind, however, is not some mere nothingness, but has a quality of clarity that clearly cognizes all the various aspects of existence. In terms of direct yogic perception, luminous clarity and emptiness exist together indistinguishably, like the sun and its rays.

One should not be content with a mere intellectual understanding of this union of clarity and emptiness (which is the true nature of mind). One should practice meditation until all states of mind are dissolved in the luminous expanse of emptiness free from taking things as real.

As a result of meditation, the negative thoughts that result in samsāric existence are relinquished and all discursive fabrications (such as painful and pleasurable thoughts) dissolve into the luminous expanse of emptiness.

According to Madhyamaka masters, this is what is understood by "The Great Madhyamaka" which unifies appearance and emptiness and which is beyond any conceptual standpoint.

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