

The parameters of the criterion we use to negate things as ultimately or inherently existent are very precise. We must recognize how something would exist at the subtlest level, if it were to exist inherently. If we do not understand the subtlest general idea of inherent existence, then some aspects of inherent existence will not be eliminated. If we do not go far enough to correctly identify the subtle object of negation, we will still hold things as truly existent to some degree. For example, even when we understand the level of negation reached by the Vaibhāṣikas, we are still holding things to be inherently existent. Grasping at this false way of existing is to fall to the extreme of eternalism. If we do not negate the subtlest notion of “inherent existence,” we will not be able to free ourselves from samsara.

We must also be careful not to fall to the extreme of nihilism and deny the existence of something that is, in fact, there. Nihilism cuts out too much and holds existent things to be nonexistent. If our definition of *truly existent* is too broad, not only do we negate inherent existence, but we may also even negate existence itself. It is too much to assert that inherent existence means mere existence. If it did, then to say that all things are empty of inherent existence would be to deny the existence of causality and the twelve links of dependent arising. We would end up negating everything. The extreme view of nihilism is worse than the extreme view of eternalism. The extreme view of eternalism does not contradict the existence of causality; it holds causes and effects to exist in addition to their superimposed appearance as inherently existent. This is a case of grasping at existence too much. This is a little less dangerous than the nihilistic view, holding existent things to be totally nonexistent, because if we negate everything then we cannot posit any virtue and nonvirtue or karma and its results. Thus we deny that it would be possible to create the causes for a good future life or any other positive goal in the future. Such negative views and negative actions would lead us to lower rebirths.

In conclusion, it is most important to identify the object of negation because if we do not define it properly, we will definitely fall to the extreme views of eternalism or nihilism. We need to know how far we can go in negating things and the point beyond which we cannot go. We have to identify the middle way that is free of the extremes. Therefore we need to

know what the extremes are and what makes something an extreme view. This kind of approach is very useful.

(b)) REFUTING OTHER SYSTEMS THAT NEGATE WITHOUT IDENTIFYING PROPERLY
THE OBJECT TO BE NEGATED

Many sutras and Madhyamaka texts, such as Nāgārjuna's *Fundamental Treatise*, contain numerous examples of logical analysis of the final nature of reality. Most of these reasons involve negations: phenomena are shown not to exist as they appear. The *Heart Sutra*, for example, appears to say that nothing is accepted or held to exist. These scriptures are commonly misinterpreted and become the basis of wrong views. Because there are so many negations, some scholars and yogis developed philosophical systems that present an overly broad object of negation. This mistaken approach rejects too much and negates the existence of everything. At the other extreme some scholars present too narrow an object of negation. They negate something but not everything that needs to be negated. To correctly understand the object of negation, we must look at how others have mistakenly identified the object to be negated. This has two parts:

- (1)) Refuting an overly broad identification of the object to be negated (chapters 4–9)
- (2)) Refuting an overly restricted identification of the object to be negated (chapter 10)

(1)) REFUTING AN OVERLY BROAD IDENTIFICATION OF THE OBJECT TO BE
NEGATED

This has two parts:

- (a')) Stating others' assertions (chapter 4)
- (b')) Showing that those assertions are wrong (chapters 4–9)

(a')) STATING OTHERS' ASSERTIONS

Here Tsongkhapa summarizes the views of some of his contemporaries as well as some earlier Tibetan Buddhist scholars who claim to be Mādhyamikas but who, in their rejection of inherent existence, go too far and negate all phenomena, from form to omniscience. The phrase “from form to omniscience” needs some explanation. To enable us to understand the characteristics and nature of all phenomena, Buddha divided all existent things into 108 categories. These are then separated into two groups: the impure side of samsara and the pure side of nirvana. The upper and lower Abhidharma literature says that there are 53 sets of afflicted phenomena on the impure side, starting with the 5 aggregates, the 12 sources, and the 18 elements. On the pure side there are 55 sets of virtuous phenomena, beginning with the 37 factors that pertain to enlightenment and concluding with the 4 buddha bodies.⁴⁴ So “from form to omniscience” encompasses all existent things: form is the first of the 5 aggregates in the first set of the impure side, and the last item of the final pure set is omniscience. There is nothing that is not included within that phrase. The *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras* teach that all these things are just empty of inherent existence.

The Madhyamaka interpretation of ultimate existence is connected with the ability to withstand ultimate analysis. Ultimate analysis is a logical search for the essential identity of an object. If something is ultimately existent then it can withstand ultimate analysis; if it is not ultimately existent then it cannot withstand ultimate analysis. The Madhyamaka approach to negating inherent existence is to analyze any proposed subject from every point of view. For example, we analyze the self in terms of the aggregates, in terms of the whole and its parts, and so on, asking, “What is that thing that I have labeled as the self?” If we analytically search for a particular person, such as Devadatta, we look for him among his five aggregates, because if he is to be found, he will be found within his aggregates of body and mind. But Devadatta is not his face, nor his body, nor any thought, feeling, or anything else among his aggregates. When we look for the real inherent nature of Devadatta, we cannot find anything. Wherever we look, outside or inside, up or down, we do not find Devadatta. Because there is nothing to be found after investigating in this way, we determine that Devadatta cannot withstand ultimate analysis.

A thing that is unable to withstand ultimate logical analysis simply disappears upon examination. We keep searching, but we cannot catch hold of anything that is the thing's essential nature. Everything that we examine loses its apparent identity, vanishing into its parts and the parts of its parts. At the end of this process, if we did indeed find something existing from its own side, as if to say, "Here I am, I am Devadatta," then this thing would be able to withstand ultimate logical analysis. However, whatever we choose to examine, whether it is the object perceived or the subject perceiving it, when we investigate its nature using ultimate analysis, in the end we find there is nothing existing from its own side. Devadatta is just nominally existent, imputed on his various aggregates. He exists, but he does not exist inherently. The Madhyamaka view is that things are imputed by conceptual or linguistic convention; terms, such as "table," "house," or "person," are labeled on a basis. What is the thing as it is labeled? When we look under the term to find the essence of that thing, we find nothing that exists from its own side as a real thing, independent of being so labeled. When we search for that thing, we eventually see just emptiness, the absence of anything existing in that way. Investigating the nature of the reality of things is like physically trying to find the core of an onion. We peel off each layer, one after another, and see that each individual layer is not the onion. We look further and further, trying to find the actual onion, but in the end we cannot find it among its parts. Another example is a distant rainbow; if we approach it to see its lovely colors in more detail, it disappears. It is unable to withstand investigation. Using this type of analysis and familiarizing themselves with it, practitioners develop a correct understanding of the absence of inherent existence, śūnyatā.

The Madhyamaka view is that nothing can bear ultimate analysis. For example, the *Heart Sutra* specifically says: "The five aggregates do not inherently exist," and lists them one by one. Then it enumerates other sets, such as the four noble truths, the twelve sources of sense consciousness, the twelve links of dependent arising, and so on, and in each case negates their inherent existence. The *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras* also explain that all things are merely empty of inherent existence in this way, expressing this idea with negations such as "They do not arise," "They do not cease," "They do not arise from self," or "They do not arise from others." Some

early Tibetan scholars concluded that, for the Mādhyamikas, these scriptures and analyses negate all existent phenomena, from form up to omniscience, and they give various reasons for identifying the object of negation so broadly. Tsongkhapa shows that each of these reasons is invalid. Here he merely lists these reasons, though in later sections he negates them one by one.

The first contention of these early Tibetan scholars concerns the fact that things cannot withstand ultimate analysis. No matter what is examined, whether pure or impure, not even an atom of it can bear ultimate analysis. These scholars have a general understanding of the Madhyamaka view that “unable to withstand ultimate analysis” and “empty of inherent existence” mean the same thing. However, they expand on this view and say, “If nothing can withstand ultimate analysis, then nothing can exist at all.” They consider everything to be the object of negation. They claim that nothing can be established because nothing can withstand ultimate analysis; since everything disappears when submitted to ultimate analysis, everything previously thought to exist is found to be nonexistent.

Their second point is that the teachings given in the sutras, such as the *Pile of Precious Things Collection (Ratna-kūṭa)*, on the four alternatives — propounding that things are not existent, not nonexistent, not both, and not neither — show that nothing exists. There is nothing that is not included in one of these four alternatives; therefore everything is rejected.

Their third point is based on the knowledge of ārya beings — those who have a direct realization of emptiness. In contrast to ordinary people, whose knowledge and perceptions are not correct, āryas’ direct understanding of śūnyatā is correct. Whatever is known by āryas’ supreme wisdom must be real; so what their ultimate knowledge understands is the criterion of what exists. The āryas’ wisdom understanding śūnyatā does not see production and cessation, bondage and liberation, and so on, to exist; it sees that these are just empty. Therefore it must be true that production and so on do not exist.

Their fourth point is that if we accept that there are such things as production, cessation, and so on, we should ask, “Can these things withstand ultimate analysis?” If they can withstand ultimate analysis, then they must be truly or ultimately existent. If they cannot withstand ultimate

analysis, then they are negated by ultimate analysis — so how can they exist? These earlier scholars do not understand that there is a huge difference between “being unable to withstand ultimate analysis” and “being negated by ultimate analysis.” Tsongkhapa says it is essential to be aware of this difference, so he discusses it later.

Their fifth point is that if we assert the existence of production, cessation, and so on, we should ask, “Are these things established by valid knowledge?” Usually *established by valid knowledge* is the necessary criterion for something to exist. If something is established by valid knowledge, it exists; if it is not established by valid knowledge, it does not exist. For example, a rabbit horn does not exist because there is no valid knowledge that observes it. In general there are two types of valid knowledge: ultimate valid knowledge that ascertains reality and conventional valid knowledge that perceives forms, sounds, and so on, and discerns right from wrong. But according to these scholars, it is incorrect to say that production and other conventional things are established by valid knowledge, because the āryas’ wisdom perceiving reality sees that production, and so forth, do not exist. These scholars argue that since an ārya’s valid knowledge does not establish conventional things, these things are not established by valid knowledge at all. If in response we say that *established by valid knowledge* means established by conventional valid knowledge, such as the sense consciousnesses, rather than by the valid knowledge of superior wisdom, then they point us to scriptures that reject conventional valid knowledge as being valid knowledge; they quote, for example, the *King of Concentrations Sutra*:

The eye, ear, and nose consciousnesses are not valid knowledge;
The tongue, body, and mental consciousnesses are also not valid
knowledge.

If these sense consciousnesses were valid knowledge,
Of what use to anyone would the āryas’ path be?

They also cite Candrakīrti’s *Introduction to the “Middle Way,”* which says, “Ordinary knowing is always invalid.” On the basis of such quotations, these earlier Tibetan scholars argue that it is incorrect to use

establishment by conventional valid knowledge as the measure or criterion of existence. Hence, production and so forth are not established by valid knowledge: the valid knowledge of āryas does not perceive it, and the so-called conventional valid knowledge of ordinary beings is not really valid knowledge at all. They assert that we too, as Mādhyamikas, cannot accept the existence of something not established by valid knowledge because to claim that something exists that is not established by valid knowledge is illogical and incorrect.

Their sixth point is that, if we accept production, we must accept it conventionally because Mādhyamikas do not accept anything to be ultimately existent. However, accepting it as conventionally existent is also incorrect because Candrakīrti's *Introduction to the "Middle Way"* says:

Whatever argument is used in the context of ultimate analysis
To negate production from self and others,
That argument negates it even conventionally;
According to you, then, due to what is there production?

Ultimate analysis rejects production from self, from others, from both, and from neither, not only ultimately but also conventionally. If there is no production — neither ultimately nor conventionally — then what kind of production is there? How can we say there is production?

Their seventh point is that if we agree that there is no production from any of the four alternatives — self, others, both, and without cause — yet still assert there is production, then our negation of production using the four alternatives fails. Nāgārjuna uses the logical reasoning of the four alternatives to negate ultimate production. If something arises then it must arise in one of those four ways: there is no other way for things to be produced. If these four alternatives are eliminated, there is no production. They say that we, as is the case with all Mādhyamikas, agree that there is no production without a cause and do not accept production from self. If we do not accept production from self, then we cannot accept production from both self and others. That eliminates three of the four alternatives. Therefore, since production must be from one of the four alternatives, we must accept production from others. However, they say that to accept

production from others is incorrect because Candrakīrti says in *Introduction to the “Middle Way,”* “Even in worldly terms there is no production from others.” So if we maintain that something arises, yet not in one of those four ways, it becomes invalid to use the four alternatives as a proof to negate production. If using the four alternatives does not succeed in negating production, it cannot succeed in negating ultimate production.

The eighth point made by earlier Tibetan scholars is that when negating production, Mādhyamikas should not apply the qualification “ultimately,” because the application of this qualification is rejected by Candrakīrti in his *Clear Words*. This is in contrast to the Svātantrika-Mādhyamikas, who say that the qualification “ultimately” must be applied in such contexts. Consider the varying interpretations of the first verse of Nāgārjuna’s *Fundamental Treatise on the Middle Way*:⁴⁵

Not from self, not from others,
Not from both, not without a cause;
Any things, anywhere,
Do not arise at any time. (1.1)

The Svātantrika-Mādhyamikas do not accept this literally. They say that the qualifier “ultimately” must be applied to certain words in this stanza so as to read:

Not from self ultimately, not from others ultimately,
Not from both ultimately, not without a cause ultimately.

The Svātantrika-Mādhyamikas even consider that the *Heart Sutra* is not definitive because it says “form does not exist” and “form does not exist inherently,” without the word “ultimately” appearing in the text. Conversely, the Prāsaṅgika-Mādhyamikas say that the qualifier “ultimately” should not be applied here. The earlier Tibetan scholars were confused by these conflicting interpretations. Some of them would say that arising and so on cannot be accepted even conventionally, whereas others would say that they are to be accepted conventionally but not ultimately. However, all of these earlier Tibetan scholars would loudly proclaim: “There is no

denying that according to the system of this master, Candrakīrti, ultimate analysis negates an essentially existent inherent nature in the case of all phenomena, because he negates inherent existence in terms of both the ultimate and the conventional. If there is no inherent nature of that kind, then what is there? Thus it is only the Svātantrika system that applies the qualifier ‘ultimately’ to the object of negation.” These scholars argue that since the Prāsaṅgika-Mādhyamikas do not apply the qualifier “ultimately” to the object of negation, they end up negating everything by means of their ultimate analysis. Nothing exists at all.

All of the above are arguments of those who accept too broad an identification of the object of negation. Their object of negation is “the existence of all phenomena” rather than “the inherent existence of all phenomena.” As a result, they reject everything, both ultimately and conventionally; they declare that all things, even conventionally existent things such as karma, are not real and do not exist. These scholars mistakenly attribute to all Mādhyamikas this overly broad identification of the object of negation.

Tsongkhapa, as a Madhyamaka scholar, defends his system from this nihilistic interpretation of Madhyamaka. He lays out all these points so that he can eliminate them and provide a response showing the genuine Madhyamaka system.

(b'') SHOWING THAT THOSE ASSERTIONS ARE WRONG

This has two parts:

- (1'') Showing that those systems contradict the unique distinguishing feature of Madhyamaka (chapters 4–5)
- (2'') Showing that the criticisms they express are not able to disprove the distinguishing feature of Madhyamaka (chapters 6–9)

(1'') SHOWING THAT THOSE SYSTEMS CONTRADICT THE UNIQUE DISTINGUISHING FEATURE OF MADHYAMAKA

This has three parts: