Start Making Sense: Finding Tsongkhapa's Middle Way

by Guy Newland

Avalokiteśvara, great treasure of non-objectifying compassion;

Mañjuśrī, master of stainless wisdom;

Vajrapāṇi, destroyer of the entire host of demons,

And crown jewel of the sages of the land of snow:

Tsongkhapa Losang Dragpa, at your feet I pray.[1]

The name of this traditional prayer, *migtsema* refers to "non-objectifying compassion" which means "loving care that has no real object." Edward Conze (130), having translated the Perfection of Wisdom Sutras, summarized that vast corpus in these lines:

A Bodhisattva is a being compounded of the two contradictory forces of wisdom and compassion. In his [*sic*] wisdom, he sees no persons; in his compassion he resolves to save them all.

Perhaps this is profound, but *as stated* it is also a perfect bit of nonsense. It is easy to liberate zero beings, so it is fortunate for bodhisattvas that zero would seem to their correct and complete count per the highest wisdom of the cosmos.

The *Teaching of Vimalakīrti* (*Vimalarkīrti-nirdeśa)* and other Mahāyāna sūtras stress that there is no intrinsic superiority between silence and speech; in each moment the bodhisattva prefers whatever is most skillful for liberation. And so it is with sensible speech and paradoxical speech; each, according to context, may be most skillful. As a manner of pointing out the profound, mystery and

paradox have a special power for the human mind. On the other hand, so also does a sensible clarity.

Tsongkhapa penetrated the profound and explained it, extensively, in the clearest and most sensible way. In sum: *Only things that are empty of inherent existence can function as causes and effects*. Only living beings who are empty can liberate or be liberated; non-empty things or persons could never function as causes or agents. Tsongkhapa quotes Candrakīrti's *Clear Words* (*Prasannapadā* as cited Tsongkhapa 2002,136):

> [In the context of emptiness,] proper and improper conduct and their consequences make sense; all worldly conventions make sense. Hence Nāgārjuna says: "For those to whom emptiness makes sense, everything makes sense."

On this passage, Tsongkhapa comments that "what makes sense" means that *these things exist*. Experiencing awakening, Tsongkhapa eloquently expressed this insight in his ecstatic poem "Praise to Dependent Arising."[2]

So that this insight might become a source of vast benefit, he set out to explain exactly *how* emptiness and dependent arising are compatible, and in order to do that he needed plausible solutions to some bedeviling philosophical problems. He had to explain how things that cannot be found under analysis can nonetheless *actually exist* and *be reliably known* to function. And in order to safeguard the functioning of conventional phenomena, he also had to show how to avoid reifying the ineffable ultimate as an absolute that collapses all else to mere illusion. He had to dispel any notion that the ultimate cancels and

supersedes conventional existence, *rather than being its necessary condition*.

Here I will summarize (1) how Tsongkhapa avoids reifying the ultimate as a monistic mystical absolute; (2) how he shows that Madhyamaka analysis does not even slightly refute the existence of conventional phenomena; (3) and, perhaps most controversially and least understood, how he explains reliable cognition of conventional phenomena (*tha snyad pa'i tshad ma*) within Candrakīrti's Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka.

1. The Ultimate Exists Conventionally

Candrakīrti's reading of Madhyamaka gained ascendance in 11ᵗʰ century Tibet, but Tibetans—leaning on Jayānanda's commentary—struggled to make sense of it. Many understood Candrakīrti to be teaching an absolutely *unknowable* ultimate. Some, such as Chaba (*phywa pa chos kyi seng ge*), criticized Candrakīrti on that basis. Chaba argued (Newland, 28) that the ultimate mind must finally, through analysis, come to *know* the final reality of all things—or else liberation will not be attainable. He faulted Candrakīrti for apparently teaching otherwise.

Others, like Mabja (*rma bya byang chub brtson 'grus*) and Batsap (*pa tshab nyi ma grags*), looked with favor on Candrakīrti's supposed notion of an ultimate beyond the realm of cognition. Some saw this as harmonious with tantric evocations of a pristine ultimate unsullied by the inevitable dualism of human consciousness (Vose, 28-29). On this reading of Candrakīrti, dualistic distinctions are kindly concessions to the needs of ordinary, frightened people; they provide no reliable knowledge. If this is correct, then how can any of the dualism-based practices of ordinary beings bring them closer to awakening?

In response to these problems, Tsongkhapa explains exactly what the ultimate reality is and how it is that we *can* know it—but also, how this derives from, rather than contradicts, Candrakīrti. The ultimate is a total negation, the sheer absence/lack of a very particular kind status that is superimposed on things by delusion. Emptiness, this negative ultimate, is therefore an existing quality, or nature, possessed by all phenomena, including all conventional phenomena. Yet, like all other phenomena, it is a dependent arising and exists only conventionally. We can study it. We can understand it. Deep meditative familiarity with this particular aspect of phenomena will root out all delusion, culminating in the inexpressible, non-conceptual and non-dual yogic insight that unwinds the needless misery of cyclic existence.

Following Candrakīrti, Tsongkhapa (2002: 211-213) argues that we become attached to things by the power of an afflictive misunderstanding, a particular consciousness that hypostatizes by superimposing intrinsic reality. Delusion-based attachment leads to karma; one stops cyclic existence by totally and finally stopping that afflicted mind. To do that one must know oneself, and all things, *as lacking intrinsic existence*.

In order to accomplish this, one must rely on a qualified teacher and, following that person's instructions, find the Madhyamka view through analysis. One carefully analyzes the meaning of authoritative scriptures and classic texts. Then, internalizing their meaning, and in accordance with it, one analyzes whether it is reasonable or possible for the person and the psychophysical aggregates to exist as they now appear.

Therefore, Tsongkhapa (2004: 219) therefore repeatedly stresses that *study is practice.* He quotes a Kadam master:

> [W]hether you show off or conceal that you studied only a handbook, you cannot get anywhere without reading a yak's load of books.

The fault of separating scholarship from yogic practice is a constant theme in Tsongkhapa's writing.[3] He laments (2002: 33):

> Nowadays those making effort at yoga have studied a few scriptures, while those who have studied much are not skilled in the key points of practice.

He sets out to remedy this situation by teaching (2000: 51) exactly how the classic texts work as the best and most authentic instructions for personal practice. Study of the scriptures and commentaries is, he says, (2004: 219) "the unexcelled cause that gives rise to the discriminating wisdom which is the sacred life-force of the path."

Study is critical because the liberating insight knowing the ultimate reality can be achieved only by meditating on precisely that which you have studied and then reflected upon. It is not that one studies one sort of thing and then later realizes or awakens to something else. In his *Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*, Tsongkhapa (2002: 23, 108 and 345) three times cites the same verse from the *King of Meditative Stabilizations Sūtra* (*Samādhirāja-sūtra)*:

If you analytically discern the lack of self in phenomena

And if you cultivate that very analysis in meditation

This will cause the result, attainment of nirvana;

There is no peace through any other means.

Tsongkhapa names only Hoshang Mahayana as an advocate of the contrary view that all thinking, all conceptualization, is the root source of our problems and thus the practice should be to abandon such. However, it is clear that, through the character of Hoshang, he is intending to refute views held by many prior and *later* Tibetans. Quoting Kamalaśīla, Tsongkhapa (2002, 332) argues that if you aspire to and teach utter non-thinking, you abandon correct analytical discrimination, thereby cutting off the only pathway to sublime wisdom.

Furthermore, Tsongkhapa (2002, 344) goes on to say that even when one has established the Madhyamaka view via analysis, one still must return, after a period of stabilizing meditation, to analyze again and again. It is not that some initial analysis sets the stage for some trans-analytical bliss. Rather, through repeatedly alternating analysis and stabilization, one eventually reaches the deepest and most powerful kind of insight. He (2002, 344) tells us to remember this critical point:

You must distinguish between (1) not thinking about true existence and (2) *knowing* the lack of true existence.

Only the latter is a path to liberation.

Identifying the Object of Negation

Tsongkhapa explains that in order to know that a particular person is absent, one must know that person; likewise, in order to know emptiness—the lack of inherent existence—one must know exactly what this inherent existence *would* be like if it were real. He (2002, 212-213) carefully explains this subtle object of negation:

> There is with regard to objects a conception that things have ontological status—a way of existing—in and of themselves, without being posited through the force of an awareness. The object of that conception is the hypothetical "self" or "intrinsic nature." To exist intrinsically or autonomously means having its own unique manner of being.

> Take the case of an imaginary snake mistakenly ascribed to a rope. If we leave aside how the snake is ascribed from the perspective apprehending a snake, and instead try to analyze what the snake is like in terms of its own nature, since a snake is simply not there in that rope, its features cannot be analyzed.

> Like that, suppose we leave aside analysis of how things appear to a conventional awareness and analyze the objects themselves, asking what is the manner of being of these things? They are not established in any way. Ignorance is that which, instead of seeing this, apprehends each thing as having a way to exist such that it can be known in and of itself, without being posited through the force of a conventional awareness.

This means that—contrary to an alternative Madhyamaka view that things have

their own nature conventionally—for Candrakīrti and Tsongkhapa view there is simply no way that things *are* in and of themselves; they have no manner of existing on their own side. Contrary to the Yogacāra view, there *are* external objects, but they exist only relative to the perspectives of *conventional consciousnesses*. So it is that they may be very different things for the beings of different realms.

All phenomena exist nominally, as mere imputations, relative to conventional minds. Importantly, Tsongkhapa does *not* restrict this explanation to conventional phenomena. He says that all objects of knowledge—even the ultimate reality, emptiness—are posited as existing in relation to conventional consciousnesses. Thus all things exist only conventionally; all things exist as mere imputations. There is nothing—even emptiness—that exists ultimately.

But what about nirvāṇa? What about the ultimate mind of nondual, transconceptual, liberating wisdom? If such an ultimate mind knows emptiness, then must that not establish emptiness as the one truly real object?

Tsongkhapa (2002, 190-192 and 198) says: NO. Emptiness exists conventionally insofar as it is recognized as existing by the conventional mind of a practitioner who has just arisen from meditation on emptiness. The ultimate mind that nondualistically knows emptiness does not regard emptiness as existing or as not existing; it knows only emptiness.

Yet still: if the profound emptiness is the final nature, the actual reality, of all things, must that not entail that it is *its own final nature*? For if it were not its own final nature, what else could be? And in that case, would it not be *self-*

existent, the one truly self-sufficient entity?

Again: no. As Tsongkhapa explains in his *Illumination of the Thought* (Hopkins, 218) there is no emptiness that is its *own* final nature. If we ask with regard to any conventional phenomenon, what is its final nature, we arrive at last at *the* emptiness of that particular phenomenon. But if we then ask of that emptiness, what is *its* final nature, we find the emptiness of that emptiness. This means that any emptiness, every emptiness, is—like everything else—a dependent arising; it does not exist by way of its own nature. Emptinesses are all exactly "of the same taste" (*ro gcig*)—the absence of inherent existence—but they do not exist on their own. An emptiness exists only in relationship to the particular phenomenon of which it is the final nature—and in relation the conventional mind that posits it to *exist as such* in the wake of deep analysis of that particular phenomenon.

2. Madhyamaka Analysis is Intent on Seeking Essential Nature

A second issue: Madhyamaka analyses show that the closer we scrutinize how any particular object exists, the less clear the object becomes. Carried to completion, Madhyamaka analyses such as those of Nāgārjuna *seem to refute every single thing imaginable*, insofar as there is nothing irreducible upon which analysis can fix. How then do we avoid Conze's paradox: "In his wisdom, the bodhisattva sees no living beings; in his compassion he vows to save them all"?

Tsongkhapa approaches this question by having an interlocutor ask: How can any reasonable person, how can any philosopher—Madhyamaka or otherwise—, analytically refute things and yet still claim they exist? How is it

possible for something to exist—as the object of our compassion, for example—when reason refutes it?

Tsongkhapa (2002, 156) responds by saying the question conflates two very different things: (1) being unable to withstand rational analysis and (2) being found by reason not to exist. Of the former he explains, "To ask whether something withstands rational analysis is to ask whether it is found by reasoning analyzing reality." In Madhyamaka analysis we are seeking to discover whether forms and so forth have an intrinsic nature. The fact that such analysis comes up empty does not mean forms do not exist. And it does not mean that reason refutes them. Rather, the inability to withstand rational analysis refutes just that which—if it did exist—would have to be found by reasoning. It refutes self-existence, intrinsic nature. And Tsongkhapa (2002, 156-7 and 160) quotes Candrakīrti's *Commentary on Āryadeva's Four Hundred* to show that this is exactly what Candrakīrti meant. Candrakīrti says, "[O]ur analysis is intent upon seeking intrinsic nature," and adds:

> When reason analyzes in this way, there is no essential nature that exists in the sensory faculties . . . they have no essential existence. If they did, then under analysis by reason their status as essentially existent would be seen more clearly, but it is not.

To make this clear, Tsongkhapa explains that this is analogous to the fact *we cannot see sounds*. Seeing and hearing are two different epistemic channels, each finding its appropriate objects but not finding (no matter how it carefully it searches) other kinds of objects that are also present. So it is with ultimate

analysis and conventional awareness. Each has its own domain, neither superseding nor canceling the other. And so Candrakīrti (cited by Tsongkhapa 2002, 160) says:

> We refute things that exist essentially; we do not refute that eyes and such are products and dependently arisen results of karma.

3. *Conventional Knowledge in Prāsaṅgika*

In a particularly important section of his *Great Treatise*, Tsongkhapa (2002, 163-175) explains exactly how and why Candrakīrti (1) asserts reliable cognition while also (2) refuting reliable cognition as taught by Buddhist realists. He does this through cogent and meticulous commentary on the relevant passages from four of Candrakīrti's texts: *Entering the Middle Way* (*Madhyamakāvatāra)*, *Clear Words* (*Prasannapadā), Commentary on Āryadeva's Four Hundred* (*Catuḥśatakavṛtti)*, and *Commentary on Nāgārjuna's Sixty Verses of Reasoning* (*Yuktiṣaṣṭikāvṛtti)*. As Tsongkhapa notes, some of these passages—which focus on the refutation of reliable cognition as asserted by Buddhist realists—had been a source of grave doubt prior to Tsongkhapa. This is because they can easily be misunderstood as completely refuting the existence of reliable cognition. Yet even after Tsongkhapa shows that Candrakīrti *does* provide for reliable cognition, his critics focus their attacks with particular vehemence on this exact point, insisting that the (1) profound emptiness and (2) reliable knowledge of the conventional are contradictory and irreconcilable. For that reason, it is important to explore this in some depth.

In brief, the term reliable cognition, *pramāṇa* (*tshad ma*), plays a central role in Buddhist epistemology especially due to the work of Dharmakīrti. In his *Treatise on Reliable Cognition (Pramāṇavarttika)* we learn that one kind of reliable cognition (epistemic instrument) is perception, wherein a sense faculty ascertains irreducible characteristics in its object, particularly the object's intrinsic capacity to perform a function (*don byed nus pa*, *arthakriyā*). Water has a nature of being wet and moistening, fire has a nature of being hot and burning. Tactile perception attests to these characteristic natures.

Tsongkhapa's critics, Tibetan and otherwise, fail to take full account of the fact that Tsongkhapa explicitly agrees with them that reliable cognition, understood in this way, cannot work in Prāsaṅgika because there is no self-existent nature, even conventionally. There is nothing irreducible and there is no way that things are in and of themselves. Tsongkhapa has to show that while nothing—including reliable cognition—exists ultimately, Candrakīrti does allow that reliable cognition of the conventional exists. He will have to explain how reliable cognition is possible even when there is no objective nature for such a mind to certify.

Is the world reliable in any way?

Tsongkhapa (2002, 164) begins his explanation of conventional reliable cognition in Prāsaṅgika by analyzing critical passages where Candrakīrti seems to say that ordinary sense consciousness can never be a source of reliable knowledge. An interlocutor quotes Candrakīrti's *Entering the Middle Way* as saying, "The world

is not reliable in any way." Is this not a straightforward denial of conventional reliable cognition?

Tsongkhapa quickly demonstrates that this is not the case. He does this by placing the passage in context and showing how Candrakīrti himself explained it in his autocommentary. There Candrakīrti explains, "Only noble beings are authorities on the *contemplation of reality* [emphasis added]," and proceeds to argue that, "if a mere visual consciousness could ascertain reality, there would be no point in training in ethics, study, reflection or meditation." Everyone would already see things just as they are. On this basis, Candrakīrti concludes, "Because the world is not reliable in any way, the world has no critique *in the context of reality*." Tsongkhapa continues, showing that Candrakīrti's *Commentary on Nagarjuna's Sixty Stanzas on Reasoning* makes the same point: the Buddha taught that the sense consciousnesses are not reliable in the specific sense that they are not reliable with regard to the reality that is final nature of things.

Thus, in context, Candrakīrti's point is that ordinary eye consciousnesses and so forth do not and will never discredit the profound truth that the path uncovers. They are not reliable in any way *in the context of knowing reality*, how it is that things finally exist. It is unreasonable to interpret these passages as meaning that Candrakīrti was somehow refuting the notion that an eye consciousness can give us reliable information about shapes and colors. If we had no reliable information at all from our senses, then how would we even begin to study, reflect and meditate? How we find our way to food and shelter?

Tsongkhapa drives this point home by considering the absurd implications of reading Candrakīrti otherwise: Suppose Candrakīrti meant: "If the eye were a reliable knower of forms, there would be no need to make an effort to practice the path in order to realize emptiness." Tsongkhapa argues that this would be as senseless as saying that if the eye is reliable regarding forms, there is no need for the ear to hear sounds. In other words, again, just as the eye and ear have are distinct epistemic pathways, each with its own respective objects, neither impeding the other, so it is with the ordinary eye consciousness seeing forms and the analytical wisdom knowing the emptiness of those forms.

Worldly Consciousnesses are Deceptive

Tsongkhapa then takes on what he acknowledges as a tougher exegetical nut. It appears that Candrakīrti is giving a general refutation of conventional reliable cognition when his *Commentary on Āryadeva's Four Hundred* says (as quoted 2002,164-5):

> The Buddha said that even consciousness . . . has a false and deceptive quality . . . That which has a false and deceptive quality . . . is not non-deceptive because it exists in one way and appears in another. It is not right to designate such as a reliable cognition because in that case all consciousnesses would be reliable cognitions.

Tsongkhapa's explains that this passage very specifically refutes conventional reliable cognition *as advocated by those who follow Dharmakīrti*. He proves this by quoting at length a passage where Candrakīrti specifically refers to his

opponents here as "logicians utterly unpracticed in the sensibilities of the world" whom you must train "as though they were young children." As Tsongkhapa explains, for these logicians sense perception is nonmistaken because it apprehends, it *gets at*, the actual intrinsic character of the object. Here Candrakīrti is refuting them because in Prāsaṅgika even conventionally there is no intrinsically existent character that perception could apprehend. When one fully sets aside how an object exists from the perspective of minds apprehending it, there is there is nothing we can say about the characteristics of the object itself.

Nonetheless, Candrakīrti cites the Buddha as saying that consciousness is deceptive. Since reliable cognition means being a reliable, nondeceptive source of information, does this not rule out any kind reliable consciousness?

Tsongkhapa (2002, 165-167) says: no. Candrakīrti here explains deceptiveness as the quality of existing in one way and appearing in another. Tsongkhapa takes this to refer to the fact that for Candrakīrti, even ordinary normal sense perception is deceived in the particular sense that things appear to it as inherently existent, and yet are not. This is another way of saying that our senses misinform us—*not* about everything—but about the ultimate nature of things. They are not reliable *in the context of reality*; they are mistaken about reality.

So the kind of reliable cognition Candrakīrti accepts operates in an environment very different from the one Dharmakīrti seems to envision. Tsongkhapa (2002, 166) quotes Candrakīrti's *Commentary on Āryadeva's Four*

Hundred (*Catuḥśataka)*:

> Worldly perceptions cannot cancel the perception of reality because
> *worldly perception is reliable only for the world* and because the objects it
> observes have a false and deceptive quality.

Candrakīrti thus seems to allow that, operating *within* this environment of
deceptively appearing objects, the world—that is to say, the conventional
mind—can have reliable perceptions, perceptions that are conventionally
reliable. These are sure to be mistaken about only one thing: the presence or
absence of intrinsic nature in their objects. Thus Candrakīrti is not giving a
general refutation of conventional reliable cognition.

Conventional Reliable Cognition in Prāsaṅgika

Tsongkhapa also proves that Candrakīrti definitely does assert conventional
reliable cognition. He quotes (2002, 167) Candrakīrti's *Clear Words*:

> [Reliable cognition and its objects] are established through mutual
> dependence. When reliable cognitions exist, then there are things that are
> objects of comprehension. When there are things that are objects of
> comprehension, then there are reliable cognitions. However, neither
> reliable cognitions nor objects of comprehension exist essentially.

As Tsongkhapa explains, this shows that Candrakīrti's apparent refutations of
reliable cognitions are in fact refutations of an *essence-based epistemology*;
Candrakīrti clearly asserts reliable cognitions and object of comprehension that

are contingently posited phenomena.

To confirm that this exegesis is the best possible reading of Candrakīrti, Tsongkhapa points to a well-known passage in *Clear Words*, "We therefore posit that the world knows objects with four reliable cognitions," referring to perception, inference, scripture, and analogy. Of course ultimately, in the context of analyzing reality, and so forth, there is no reliable cognition. Also, no cars, dogs, or boats. In such a context, we also cannot find any *absence* of reliable cognition. Nothing truly exists, nothing inherently exists, nor do things inherently not exist; everything is equally and completely empty. But as we address one another with words, seeking to organize conferences or to make arguments, Candrakīrti clearly specifies that *there is reliable cognition*. In the midst of the continuous deceptive appearance of things as inherently real, there are nonetheless reliable sources of information.

This leaves the most critical question: if Candrakīrti denies any essential character in the object for a reliable cognition to apprehend, then *in what sense can we say that it knows its object*? What does it mean to say that one mind is a reliable source of information and another is not when in fact there is exactly zero independent objective reality against which to judge?

To spell out the answer to this, Tsongkhapa (2002, 167) quotes Candrakīrti's *Entering the Middle Way*:

Also, perceivers of falsities are of two types:

Those with clear sensory faculties and those with impaired sensory

faculties.

A consciousness with an impaired sensory faculty

Is considered wrong in relation to a consciousness with a good sensory

faculty.

Those objects known by the world

And apprehended with six unimpaired sensory faculties

Are true for the world. The rest

Are posited as unreal for the world.

If a sensory consciousness is unimpaired—unaffected by superficial causes of error such as eye disease—then, it is accurate in conventional terms. It is still mistaken in terms of appearance because, under the influence of ignorance, it its object appears as though it were intrinsically existent. Yet this does not contradict conventional accuracy. Except in the context of considering the ultimate reality, how things ultimately exist, ordinary unimpaired minds *are* reliable sources of information about what does and does not exist. They are reliable cognitions.

Candrakīrti (as cited in Tsongkhapa 2002, 168) lists at moderate length examples of internal and external impairment—echoes, reflections, and so forth—and nowhere hints that the fundamental ignorance is an instance of such. Candrakīrti apparently takes it for granted, implicit in the qualification "for the world," that we know that none of these distinctions—in fact, no distinctions at all—hold up in an ultimate sense. If we did count the fundamental ignorance as a cause of impairment here, then we would always perceive everything through impaired faculties, and thus everything we know would be utterly unreal even conventionally. This is a view that perhaps some critics of Tsongkhapa would

accept. But if Candrakīrti intends to rule out any kind conventional reliable cognition, he could easily include the fundamental ignorance among the causes of impairment in these verses or commentary, and yet he does not.

And indeed: If there were no conventionally reliable information at all, then how could we distinguish virtue and nonvirtue? How would we determine what texts to study or which teacher to rely upon? And again, how we find food and so forth if we had no reliable way to make any sort distinctions? There are Buddhists who posit that there is no possibility of knowing conventional objects because all that appears is a web of delusion. They have quite a few philosophical problems of their own. We cannot make improvements in our minds or our world if we have not the slightest foothold on reality, no first step to stand upon. And thus it is that they will say, and in fact they *must* say, that we are *already* buddhas. For if we were not, we never would be. The idea of gradual progression makes no sense when everything that appears is totally delusory.

Certified Testimony vs. Unimpeached Testimony

From this, we see Candrakirti's notion of conventional reliable cognition—by which we mean sources of accurate information about what does/does not exist conventionally—is very different from that of Dharmakīrti. Candrakīrti never posits a mind certifying the presence or absence of some intrinsic quality in its object. This is impossible in his system. But by reading Candrakīrti carefully—not leaning too heavily on Jayānanda but closely reading what Candrakīrti actually says and does not say—Tsongkhapa shows us *that Candrakīrti does assert conventional reliable cognition*. He asserts minds that are accurate, reliable, "for

the world," which means: at the conventional level. *And there is no other level at which any positive or negative statement can be affirmed*. Reliable minds that are just those unaffected by superficial causes of error. Those unaffected by superficial causes of error can impeach, or discredit, those that are. Those impaired by superficial error cannot discredit those that are not.

So, the conventional reliable knowledge of Candrakīrti and Tsongkhapa does not operate by way of certifying the presence of some essential character in its objects. It is rather that, having apprehended an object, its apprehension of that object is not falsified, or discredited, by some other mind. It is not that its testimony is notarized by the impression of the aspect of some nature in its object; there is no self-existent nature in the object. Rather, it simply stands as *unimpeached*—and that very lack of impeachment is warrant for relying on that information. Tsongkhapa's *Illumination of the Thought* (Hopkins, 228) puts it this way:

> The positing of a conventional object—apprehended by the six consciousnesses without such impairment—as real and the positing of an object opposite to that as unreal is done only in relation to worldly consciousnesses because those are, respectively, unimpeached and impeached by worldly consciousnesses with respect to their existing as they appear.

Conventional objects are never real or true in the sense of existing just as they appear; their fundamental mode of existence is discordant with the manner in which they seem to exist. But they do exist and we can know them. Reliable

knowledge comes from conventional consciousnesses that are free from superficial causes of error, and are thus not impeached by other conventional minds.

For example: We can know that, conventionally, water is wet. But this is not because our sense powers detect the nature of wetness out there in the water. If we claim this, then we are asserting conventional reliable cognition in a Dharmakīrtian mode—and validating Tsongkhapa's critics. Candrakīrti and Tsongkhapa do not assert this. Instead, they say, we know that water is wet because it is perceived that way by a conventional mind that lacks a superficial cause of error and, for that very reason, is not impeached by another conventional mind.

Conventional Existence

We can see how this principle of falsification works when Tsongkhapa defines conventional existence. If his critics were correct that he imported an essentialist notion of cognition, then he would perhaps say that to exist means to be certified as existing by one of the four types of reliable cognition. Instead, he (2002, 178) goes directly to Candrakīrti's notion of impeachment or falsification:

> How does one determine whether something exists conventionally? We hold that something exists conventionally (1) if it is known to a conventional consciousness (*tha snyad pa'i shes pa*); (2) if no *other*[4] conventional reliable cognition contradicts its being as it is thus known; and (3) if reason that accurately analyzes reality—that is, analyzes

whether something intrinsically exists—does not contradict it. What fails to meet those criteria does not exist. [emphasis added]

Since nothing exists ultimately in Madhyamaka, to know what conventionally exists is to know what exists. And here we see that, whatever others may say, for Tsongkhapa *conventional existence is NOT defined via the incontrovertible certification of perception or inference*. Rather, Tsongkhapa follows Candrakīrti in delineating the class of existing objects by (1) first placing in view all objects, every object known by any conventional consciousness, and then (2) seeing which of those apprehensions can be impeached. Within the broad sphere of what living beings apprehend, those things that cannot be ruled delusory are exactly those that we may take to exist.

Note particularly Tsongkhapa's use of the word "other" (*gzhan*) in the second criterion, when he states that something may conventionally exist only if no *other* conventional reliable cognition contradicts the consciousness apprehending it. If the mirage's being water is contradicted by conventional reliable cognition, then it turns out that the prior conventional consciousness was actually not a reliable cognition at all. So why does Tsongkhapa say (and repeat in other places) this apparently unnecessary use of the word "other"? The implication is quite clear: He accounts for the situation where we actually *believe* that we do have a reliable cognition, but later—looking at the matter more closely, in a different light, or upon further analysis—find that that the early perception was incorrect due to a then-undetected superficial cause of error, an error of which one was originally unaware.

A person may see a mirage in the west and take it to be water. They may believe that they have knowledge of the presence of water via reliable perception. And yet as they proceed to the west, they find that there is no water. They then realize that what they reasonably took to be a reliable perception was in fact not such. The traditional examples of this sort are all comprehended within Candrakīrti's category of superficial causes of error—echoes, reflections, intoxication, disease, bad philosophy.

Many things that conventional consciousness take as true may in fact be false—and yet that mistakenness may not recognized until much later. It cannot be that older, actually reliable cognitions are refuted by other, later occurring cognitions. The fact is that what we reasonably count as reliable knowledge now may later come to be understood never to have been such. Tsongkhapa does not stress this point, but it is implicit in his use of the word "other" in his definition of conventional existence.

Instability and Progress: In Science and Mind-Training

It appears Tsongkhapa has here created circular definitions. Believed-in-things can be taken as real if uncontradicted by reliable minds, reliable cognizers. These reliable minds are taken as reliable precisely insofar as they are unimpeached. By what might they be impeached? By reliable minds, to wit, minds unimpaired by superficial causes of error such as eye disease, echoes, mirrors, or bad philosophy. Of course we could only know which minds are, and which are not, so impaired by relying upon the investigations of reliable minds.

Such circularity is surely inevitable in any foundationless epistemology,

any philosophy that proposes to describe knowledge without positing an absolute ground. Because there is no essential nature at all, there can be no correspondence theory of what it means to know; instead, Prāsaṅgika epistemology is coherentist. Whatever it is that we suppose we know may later have to be revised. The present Dalai Lama—who counts himself a staunch follower of Tsongkhapa—extends this notion of revisable knowledge into his perspective on science. He says that if science proves something different than what is found in scripture, then we should trust science, understanding that the Buddha was skillfully teaching in terms of what his audience understood at that earlier time. The Dalai Lama (2005, 3) writes:

> If scientific analysis were conclusively to demonstrate certain claims in Buddhism to be false, then we must accept the findings of science and abandon those claims.

And he says (2004, 97) that Abhidharma cosmology

> gives very exact measurements of the distance from the earth to the moon and sun and the stars, as well as the size of the sun and moon. The problem is, these measurements are wrong from the modern scientific point of view . . .

and concludes (2005, 80):

> My own view is that Buddhism must abandon many aspects of the Abhidharma cosmology.

Before germs were discovered, disease was inevitably associated with many other causes. There was as yet no conventional reliable cognition that could challenge such postulations. The invention of microscopes and telescopes did not eliminate superficial causes of error, but instead enhanced perception so that it became possible to impeach previously unimpeached conventional beliefs. What had been reasonably taken as knowledge about the cause of disease and the movement of the stars came to be understood as fiction. In this way, the philosopher of science Karl Popper (Zalta, 2019) sees science as an "*evolutionary process* in which hypotheses or conjectures are imaginatively proposed and tested in order to explain facts or to solve problems."

As has been argued (Cowherds, 71), this instability—this lack of *final* certainty about what constitutes knowledge—is not a lamentable quagmire. Rather, it is exactly what makes evolutionary progress, both material and spiritual, possible. For whatever plausible purpose we have, we may seek improvements to the methods through which we pursue it and the beliefs associated with those methods. Even things that are very widely believed may come to be discredited through the further use, or amplification, of conventional epistemic instruments—that is to say, through better empirical evidence and/or better analysis.

Through a process of impeaching past beliefs and abandoning behaviors associated with such, we can refine ways of living—modes of practice—better suited to our situation, including our bodies, minds and total environments. Apparently successful interactions with other living beings and the physical

environment lead to acceptance as conventional fact the presumptions behind new methods of acting. And such have verisimilitude, standing as fact unless discredited by some further deployment—or enhancement (through technology or nonordinary power)—of the unimpaired observer's conventional faculties.

It is thus quite reasonable that the Dalai Lama, a scholar-yogi with truly profound insight into the teaching of Tsongkhapa, would advocate the refinement of knowledge—even when it supersedes scripture—through subsequent analysis and investigation. The gradual transformation of the mind, culminating in awakening, depends on the idea of progress, the possibility of improvement, as distinct from alternative Buddhist notions that we are all perfectly awakened already. The Dalai Lama understands that there is congruence between the scientific method and the successive refinement that takes place in Buddhist mind-training. In each case, we start with models or presumptions about how to proceed, what matters, and how the world works—and these models are refined or superseded through subsequent insight or discovery.

By attentive conventional practice we can become gradually more skilful in acting to promote happiness. Concepts, models, ideas, stories, maps: they are never the world itself. But then again, there is never any natural way the world is just in itself, apart from some perspective upon it. All things are empty of such nature. So what we need, and what we *can* develop, are better models, stories more conducive to healing and transformation. Never idling in swamp of popular opinion or custom, we hone our ways of working as physicians, scientists, and spiritual teachers. We can become deeply attuned in our responses, knowing

quickly which test to run, which question to pose to which student, what dose to give which patient, even though *all things are equally empty*.

Because *only empty things work*. It is *because* of emptiness—not despite it— that there are better and worse ways of doing things in terms of the outcomes we seek. As Tsongkhapa (2019) says:

The absence of self-nature anywhere

And this arising because of that—

Both of these teachings are true . . .

Such realizations do not hinder one another;

Rather, they complement one another.

What is more wonderful, more astonishing, than that?

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[1] My translation of the prayer which was, according to tradition, originally offered by Tsongkhapa to his teacher Rendawa, but rewritten in this form by Rendawa and offered back to Tsongkhapa.

[2] https://www.tibetanclassics.org/html-assets/In%20Praise%20of%20Dependent%20Origination.pdf

[3] See sūtra quotes at LRCM volume 3:340.

[4] *gzhan* Tsongkhapa at 3,178 in English; page 627 in the Blue Lake edition used for that translation; page 586 in Yeshay Thapkay edition. Tsongkhapa (3, 179) uses the word "other" (*gzhan*) again, in the same or similar sense, when explaining this definition: "Other conventional valid cognitions do not contradict that which exists conventionally." Other than . . . what? He means that if something actually exists conventionally, no new conventional cognition will discredit it. So if "another" (later) conventional cognition DOES discredit it, this means that—contrary to what we had thought—the prior "reliable cognition" was not really such.