

5-2012

# On the Absence of Self: A Critical Analysis of Tsongkhapa's Philosophy of Emptiness.

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## Recommended Citation

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On the Absence of Self:

A Critical Analysis of Tsongkhapa's Philosophy of *Emptiness*

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of Honors

By

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April 16, 2012

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## Introduction

Tsongkhapa (1357-1419) is one of Tibet's most notable philosophers and his philosophy reflects what came to be formalized as the Geluk tradition of Tibetan Buddhism.<sup>1</sup> Tsongkhapa's primary concern, and the focus of this paper, is the philosophy of *śūnyatā*, or *emptiness*.

Interpreted in various ways, *emptiness* grew to become one of the central doctrines for most schools of Tibetan Buddhism. The doctrine of *emptiness* proposes, in general terms, that all phenomena, objects, people, experiences, thoughts, etc., have no intrinsic existence. In effect, all things are 'empty' of a permanent, self-sustaining, and self-enclosed existence. This idea of *emptiness*, as advanced by the Prāsaṅgika-Mādhyamaka<sup>2</sup> school of thought, is seen by Tsongkhapa as the natural culmination of the Buddhist doctrine of *anātman* or 'no-self'.<sup>3</sup> No-self is the polar opposite of the soul-hypothesis. Whereas the soul-hypothesis maintains that each of us are essentially separate and distinct from everything else based on our possession of an unique, individual kernel or nugget-like essence, no-self maintains the opposite: we do not contain an individual essence and thus are not really separate from other phenomena. Within *Mahāyāna* Buddhism the no-self doctrine was expanded to encompass all phenomena, not only sentient beings. This expanded philosophy is the *emptiness* elaborated on by Tsongkhapa.

To discuss Tsongkhapa's philosophy, I will reconstruct the presentation of Thupten Jinpa's *Self, Reality and Reason in Tibetan Philosophy: Tsongkhapa's Quest for the Middle Way*,

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<sup>1</sup> Although here I generalize Tsongkhapa's philosophy towards the entire Geluk tradition, it is important to remember that the Geluk school includes not only the primary works of Tsongkhapa, but also a vast amount of commentarial literature that adds to the overall philosophical position of the school.

<sup>2</sup> This school of thought is attributed primarily to Chandrakīrti but also has some of its roots in Buddhapaṇita's commentaries on Nāgārjuna. Tsongkhapa follows this school.

<sup>3</sup> Thupten Jinpa, *Self, Reality and Reason in Tibetan Philosophy: Tsongkhapa's Quest for the Middle Way*, (Abingdon, Oxon, UK: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002), 70.

explain its major ideas, and provide some critiques and explanations of my own. For reasons I will discuss in more detail later, I use the individual self as a focal point to illustrate the general features of Tsongkhapa's philosophy.

## **Two truths**

The most important aspect of Tsongkhapa's philosophy, and a necessary precursor to understanding the rest of his ideas, is his delineation of the two truths of reality. Tsongkhapa claims that there is not a single truth of reality, but rather that there are two. The first is the truth of conventional existence which constitutes our phenomenal experience of the world. The second truth is the *emptiness* of intrinsic existence. Tsongkhapa says *emptiness* is the ultimate nature of things, but that things still remain existent conventionally. Tsongkhapa defines conventional existence along three main criteria: 1) Conventional existence must be capable of being experienced or taken as an intentional object of consciousness. This simply means that the object in question must be in accordance with the perspectives of the world. 2) Conventional existence must not only be known to the world, but it must also not be contradicted by another conventional valid cognition. For example, if I see a coiled rope and think it is a snake this is not reality as this perspective can be invalidated upon further investigation of the object. 3) Conventional existence must not be invalidated by any analysis pertaining to the ultimate ontological status of things.<sup>4</sup> Tsongkhapa explains his criteria in the following way:

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 156-7.

One might wonder, ‘By what means does one determine whether something is to be accepted or rejected as conventionally existent?’

[Answer:] (i) That it is familiar to conventional cognition; (ii) that the convention thus known is not invalidated by some other valid conventional knowledge; and (iii) that the convention thus known must not be invalidated by reasoning that thoroughly probes into the way things [really] are – i.e., enquires as to whether or not something exists by means of its intrinsic nature. Those that fulfill these [three criteria] are accepted as being non-existent [even] conventionally.<sup>5</sup>

Based on the third ground it would seem that since no phenomena can withstand thorough analysis even persons cannot be said to exist. Here it is essential to understand the necessity of arguing within the correct sphere. Persons, being conventional realities, lie beyond the scope of an ultimate analysis to either negate or affirm.<sup>6</sup> Therefore the inability to *withstand* ultimate analysis is not the same as being *negated* by such an analysis.<sup>7</sup> This distinction, as explained below, is the foundation of Tsongkhapa’s idea that existence is illusion-like not an illusion itself.<sup>8</sup>

Tsongkhapa maintains that the ultimate and conventional truths of reality each demand their own domains of discussion and cannot be argued from outside their spheres. To illustrate this, Thupten Jinpa uses the story of two men who are disputing the identity of a figure depicted in a mural. One man says the figure is Indra while the other says it is Vishnu. To settle their dispute the two men approach a third party to arbitrate. The arbitrator, to the surprise of the two men, settles the dispute by saying that neither man is correct, but that the figure is a mere drawing and as such is neither Indra nor Vishnu.<sup>9</sup> Tsongkhapa holds the view that it is really the

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<sup>5</sup> Trans. *ibid.*, 157.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, 157.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, 157.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, 25.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, 42.

arbitrator who is wrong. Both men in the dispute understood that the figure was a drawing; this point was not their dispute. Their dispute was which figure was *depicted* in the mural. When the arbitrator answered that it was nothing but a drawing he had stepped outside the boundaries of their dispute and made a claim that was nonsensical to their argument. In other words, the arbitrator did not actually take a position on any answer to the question the two disputants were asking. Therefore, the question of whether or not the arbitrator is correct simply does not arise.<sup>10</sup>

This story explains the distinction between different domains of discourse and why a perspective from one domain cannot be used in an argument that is taking place in another domain. Simply put, conventional reality cannot be negated on the grounds of an argument that deals with ultimate nature and ultimate nature cannot be verified on the grounds of a conventional argument. Tsongkhapa explains this distinction when he gives the two statements ‘Dharmadatta sees a form’ and ‘A substantially real Dharmadatta sees a form.’ The first statement cannot be negated because it operates on the level of conventional discourse while the second makes a metaphysical claim and can therefore be refuted.<sup>11</sup> For this reason, the conventional reality of things—tables, chairs, persons, etc.—cannot be negated by an ultimate analysis, ultimate analysis can only negate their ultimate existence. This distinction brings us to one of Tsongkhapa’s main objectives: to show that the accusations of nihilism and incoherence thrown at Buddhist thought arise from a misapprehension of the two perspectives and applying ultimate negation to the conventional level.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 44.

According to Tsongkhapa, to say that things exist conventionally is in accordance with everyday experience.<sup>12</sup> Conventional discourse does not posit any claims over and above conventional existence itself and Tsongkhapa maintains that there cannot be any proof of conventional existence outside the bounds of everyday language.<sup>13</sup> Because all that can be shown to exist exists on the conventional level, existence itself equals conventional existence.<sup>14</sup> This is not to say that there is no ultimate truth, the ultimate truth is the *emptiness* of all things, but that even *emptiness* exists on the conventional level as it does not exist in-and-of-itself.<sup>15</sup> In this way, *emptiness* is not some type of essential essence that can be grasped onto. This point is of utmost importance to Tsongkhapa; there are not two spheres of reality, one ultimate and one conventional, but two faces of the same world.<sup>16</sup> There is only one world, the world of our everyday experience.<sup>17</sup> It is important to note that this point is the source of much debate within the Geluk tradition as some Geluk thinkers maintain that the world of everyday existence is a world of illusion that will be bypassed when one attains an enlightened mind which sees only *emptiness*.<sup>18</sup> For Tsongkhapa, this separation is not only logically incoherent, but it is also dangerous as it constitutes nihilism.<sup>19</sup> For Tsongkhapa, the essencelessness of phenomena plays a very positive role as it is precisely because persons lack an intrinsic existence (and thus their

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

conventional existence cannot be negated by reasoning that analyzes the ultimate existence of things) that they can engage in the world of dependent origination.<sup>20</sup>

### ***Emptiness and Dependent Origination***

So what actually is Tsongkhapa's notion of *emptiness*? At the end of any analysis pertaining to the ultimate only *emptiness* can be found. But what does this mean? Here a basic explanation of *emptiness* is necessary to begin our discussion. Imagine in my hand I hold a small heap of sand. One by one I pick up individual sand grains and throw them into a river. At what point does this heap cease to be a heap? If at some point you say the heap is no longer a heap and I add single grains of sand back at what point does it resume its status as a heap? This example illustrates the point that the 'heap-hood' of the sand is dependent upon mental and linguistic construction; the heap does not exist in any substantial way in objective reality. In this way, just as there is no ultimate heapness a sand heap contains, there is no ultimate selfhood a being contains.

Tsongkhapa's analyses do not uncover any evidence for the ultimate existence of things, persons, etc. Rather, as his analyses show, in any way existence can relate to the material world and rational thought it is established by interrelations between multiple parts and seemingly separate objects. Thus, outside conventional existence, things are simply empty of self-sustaining existence. This point is difficult to grasp and Tsongkhapa maintains that analytical examples can only help us go so far. A basic understanding of Tsongkhapa's *emptiness* is like seeing the world

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 165.



without the glasses which impute intrinsic existence we normally wear. It is seeing a world that has no underlying ground, but instead is supported by complex interrelations.

When Tsongkhapa is discussing *emptiness* he says that dependent arising is the ‘meaning’ or ‘content’ (*don*) of *emptiness*.<sup>21</sup> These two ideas, *emptiness* and dependent origination, support one another and analysis into either will give rise to insight into the other. Dependent origination is the idea that everything in the phenomenal world exists or ‘arises’ in dependence upon all other factors of existence. Take, for example, a table. The table could not exist without the wood it is made of. In turn, the form of the lumber in the table is dependent on the wood cutter who originally cut the tree down. Continuing on, we can see that prior to its cutting, the tree that the table would eventually be made of was dependent on soil, water, and sunlight to grow. It was dependent on the seed from which it grew which had its own causes and so on. Eventually, the table’s lumber will rot away and its material matter will again be recycled through the web of organic life. As we can see, there is no knowable end to the chain of interconnections that results in the temporal existence of the table in our discussion. After further contemplating this topic we can see that the above description of the dependent origination of the table is incredibly simplistic, as a thorough description is beyond our capability to grasp. In this conception of existence, everything arises from a myriad of factors we mistakenly identify as essentially separate with identities independent from the subject in question. Yet conventionally we can accurately and truthfully speak of a table even while the table has no independent existence.

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

## **The *tetralemma***

Before continuing it is necessary to briefly describe Tsongkhapa's method of analysis. The same argument structure Tsongkhapa used, the *tetralemma*, enjoyed a long history amongst Buddhist thinkers both before and after Tsongkhapa's time. The *tetralemma* holds that no inherently-existing entity can be said to exist in any of the four following ways:

- 1) as existent
- 2) as non-existent
- 3) as both existent and non-existent
- 4) as neither existent nor non-existent<sup>22</sup>

Tsongkhapa maintains that in order for intrinsic existence to exist it must do so in one of the four above possibilities. Because this is so, Tsongkhapa goes about negating the self through negating each of these possibilities. Here the non-being of phenomena must also be negated, otherwise phenomena such as space could be said to intrinsically exist as non-being.

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

## Defining what is negated

Tsongkhapa identifies intrinsic existence as his object of negation. Intrinsic existence can be conceived of in many ways and so it is necessary to address each of them in order to clearly identify which conceptions are negated. This is necessary because a complete negation of intrinsic existence must be upheld for there to be no chance of residual reification. Positive conceptions of the self or ultimate existence, regardless of whether you call it *brahmā*, Buddha-nature, *emptiness*, or the absolute, open the possibility to slip into reification. This is the reason Tsongkhapa both thoroughly defines the self and maintains that *emptiness* is not a substratum of ultimate reality, but rather a quality of conventionally existent phenomena. Tsongkhapa says that no matter what terms we use to describe the self we will try to grasp on to it and that only complete negations can liberate us from the essentialist position which provides the ground for our afflictive emotions.

Because dealing with *emptiness* as a general concept without focusing on any of its particular instances is both difficult and conflicts with the way Tsongkhapa describes *emptiness*, I will primarily focus on the no-self argument to illustrate Tsongkhapa's ideas. In fact, this way of explicating *emptiness* makes sense in light of Tsongkhapa's description of the path of realization as he says that insight into no-self must come prior to insight into the *emptiness* of all phenomena.

Because Tsongkhapa is in communication with other Buddhist philosophers his *emptiness* argument presupposes basic knowledge of the Buddhist no-self doctrine. As explained by Thupten Jinpa the no-self doctrine maintains:

- 1) The existence of the self as an independent, eternal, and atemporal unifying principle is an illusion.
- 2) There is no need to posit an abiding principle such as *ātman* (or soul) to explain the nature of our experience or the laws of causality.
- 3) The existence of persons must be understood in terms of the five physical and mental aggregates,<sup>23</sup> which serve as the basis of personal identity.
- 4) Grasping at self lies at the root of our unenlightened existence.
- 5) The negation of the mistaken conception of self lies at the heart of the path to freedom.<sup>24</sup>

As discussed before, Tsongkhapa's first breakdown of the self splits it into two spheres: the ultimate and conventional. An ultimate self refers to an inherently existing and self-defined entity while the conventional self refers to the dependently-arisen self of our everyday interactions. Tsongkhapa explicitly lays out this distinction when he says:

Thus, there are two senses to the term 'self' (*bdag*): a self conceived in terms of an intrinsic nature that exists by means of intrinsic being, and a self in the sense of the object of our simple, natural thought 'I am.' Of these two, the first is the object of negation by reasoning, while the second is not negated, for it is accepted as conventionally real.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> The five aggregates or *skandhas* constitute the entirety of our personal experiences and consciousness. They are: form, sensation, perception, mental formation, and consciousness.

<sup>24</sup> Thupten Jinpa, *Self, Reality and Reason in Tibetan Philosophy: Tsongkhapa's Quest for the Middle Way*, 70.

<sup>25</sup> Trans. *Ibid.*, 71.

Next, Tsongkhapa separates the ultimate self into three conceptions. Although there is significant overlap in these ideas, each exists as its own conception of how an intrinsically-existing self exists. The first conception is that of a unitary, unchanging, and self-enclosed reality.<sup>26</sup> According to this view all things contain individual essences that comprise one unitary substratum of reality. This is the *ātman* and *brahmān* theory of certain non-Buddhist Indian schools of thought. The second conception of self is that of a self-sufficient, substantially real self.<sup>27</sup> This self, according to Tsongkhapa, is the result of philosophical speculations of the self. In this conception the self is associated with its aggregates like a master to servant.<sup>28</sup> This is the same position the soul-hypothesis takes. To further illustrate this second level of self Tsongkhapa alludes to a passage in Dharmakīrti's *Pramāṇavarttikā*. This passage contains a thought experiment that asks:

If a celestial being unimaginably attractive and possessing an enviable physique appears in front of you and proposes that you exchange your own body for his, would you be willing to do it? Similarly, if Mañjuśrī, the Buddha of wisdom, were to give you the opportunity to exchange your own unenlightened mind with his transcendent mind of true insight would you be willing to accept the exchange?<sup>29</sup>

That in both cases you would accept the exchange says that somewhere deep in your mind is the conception of a self that you would be willing to sacrifice your body and mind to

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 75. Thongkhapa's thought on this particular view of the self seems to shift from his early to later philosophy though the shift does not constitute any substantial revision of his earlier ideas.

<sup>29</sup> Trans. Thupten Jinpa, *Self, Reality and Reason in Tibetan Philosophy: Tsongkhapa's Quest for the Middle Way*, 77.

benefit.<sup>30</sup> According to Tsongkhapa, this second conception of self, like the first, maintains that the self is distinct from the aggregates and is therefore necessarily theoretical as this idea is acquired intellectually beyond our everyday experience of the world.<sup>31</sup>

The third conception of self is self as intrinsic nature.<sup>32</sup> In this conception, the idea of an inherent self such as *ātman* is redefined as intrinsic nature. This self is no longer dependent on a subject, but rather becomes a universal concept. Of these three, Tsongkhapa says only the third conception is not negated in Vasubandhu's *Abhidharma-kośa-bhāṣya*<sup>33</sup> and is the reason the no-self doctrine requires another treatment. Tsongkhapa believes that these three conceptions of the ultimate self are logically exhaustive and therefore the total negation of all three would negate the existence of any intrinsically existent self.

Now that the self has been defined along the lines of conventional and ultimate existence and the ultimate self has been separated into three conceptions, the last step is to outline the seven possible ways the self could be conceived of in relation to the aggregates:

- 1) as independent from the aggregates
- 2) as identical to the aggregates
- 3) as dependent on the aggregates like an object inside a container
- 4) as the basis of the aggregates
- 5) as the possessor or 'appropriator' of the aggregates

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>33</sup> The *Abhidharma-kośa-bhāṣya* is a critique on the interpretations the Sarvāstivādins and others had of the tenets Vasubandhu presented in his original work, the *Abhidharma-kośa*. This commentary includes sections refuting the idea of the 'person' (*pudgala*) advocated by some Buddhists.

- 6) as the collection of the aggregates
- 7) as a special configuration of the aggregates<sup>34</sup>

For the purposes of this paper it is not necessary to describe each of these points in detail so I will simply say that as long as the self is conceived of in an essential manner in relation to the aggregates, one is led to uphold either dualism or monism.<sup>35</sup> In Tsongkhapa's final analysis both of these positions, dualism and monism, are shown to be untenable.<sup>36</sup>

To finish clarifying his definitions, Tsongkhapa includes the three characteristics of an intrinsic self. An intrinsic self must be non-contingent, independent, and invariable.<sup>37</sup> Of these three, the third characteristic is Tsongkhapa's contribution to the no-self argument. To illustrate these three characteristics of the intrinsic self, Thupten Jinpa uses the example of fire:

- 1) it must not be 'artificial' or contingent – i.e., it must be innate to fire;
- 2) it must be, unlike the heat of boiling water, not dependent on other factors;
- 3) it must also be invariable to fire in all the three times, i.e., past, present, and future.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Thupten Jinpa, *Self, Reality and Reason in Tibetan Philosophy: Tsongkhapa's Quest for the Middle Way*, 83.

<sup>35</sup> This is because once there is an assumption of the existence of two entities with distinct, independent identities one is naturally led to conclude that either they are ultimately one and the same thing, or they are in some essential manner distinct from one another. *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>36</sup> Thupten Jinpa, *Self, Reality and Reason in Tibetan Philosophy: Tsongkhapa's Quest for the Middle Way*, 83.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

Now that Tsongkhapa's delineation of the self is complete one may ask why it is necessary to be so particular about our understanding of the self. After all, would it not have been easier for Tsongkhapa to simply leave his definition of the ultimate self as an intrinsically existing, self-defined reality as he started with? Again, the reason Tsongkhapa's delineation of the self is so detailed is that he intends his work to completely eliminate any chance of reification of the self. In order to do this Tsongkhapa 'fills out' his definition of the self to remove the chance of undernegation. In Tsongkhapa's view, if some conception of the self escapes negation our natural tendency to grasp onto some substantial existence will reestablish it as a substantial reality. Thus, the self must be negated in every aspect of ultimate it can be conceived.

### **What is found**

So what is found when Tsongkhapa applies the idea of intrinsic existence to the *tetralemma*? Simply put, Tsongkhapa shows that the ultimate, intrinsic existence of things can be disproven but not their conventional existence.<sup>39</sup> Tsongkhapa does this in several ways. First, in relation to the three conceptions of self discussed earlier,<sup>40</sup> Tsongkhapa says that any conception that views the self and the aggregates as separate is necessarily theoretical as this conception goes against our everyday experience of the world.<sup>41</sup> In dealing with the concept of a self that is independent of the aggregates, such as *ātman*, Tsongkhapa says that it is logically impossible to make any meaningful connection between the self and the aggregates. In simple terms, how can

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>40</sup> These being unitary substance, self-sufficient self, and intrinsic nature.

<sup>41</sup> Thupten Jinpa, *Self, Reality and Reason in Tibetan Philosophy: Tsongkhapa's Quest for the Middle Way*, 75.



an unchanging entity such as the self relate to the aggregates which are multiple, momentary, and in constant flux?<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, no such unchanging entity is the object of what Tsongkhapa calls our ‘I-consciousness’, or natural sense of selfhood, which always relates to either our physical or mental person.<sup>43</sup> Tsongkhapa also argues that if such an unchanging self exists it must be observable in our experience. As we do not experience this Tsongkhapa concludes such a self does not exist.<sup>44</sup>

Using the example of a tree, Tsongkhapa says if we plant a seed and it grows into a tree we think, ‘I have planted this tree.’<sup>45</sup> In reality the tree is not the same as the seed we planted, but we think of it as an enduring entity rather than the continuum of dependent influences it really is. Tsongkhapa’s second objection is that within our everyday, natural existence we do not relate to a metaphysical self. Instead, we identify with either one or a combination of our aggregates. For example, if I cut myself I can truthfully say, ‘I have cut myself’. Likewise, if I feel happy I can truthfully say, ‘I am happy’.<sup>46</sup> These are the ways we normally interact with the world; either in relation to our body or our mind. In relation to the thought ‘I am’ such as in, ‘I am going to eat’, ‘I am happy’, ‘I thought about so and so’, and ‘I remember’, we always relate to either one or a combination of our aggregates.<sup>47</sup> There is nothing in our experience that suggests our natural thoughts of ‘I’ can exist independent of our aggregates (e.g., feelings, perceptions,

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 119.

consciousness).<sup>48</sup> Thus, any metaphysical theory of the self must necessarily be a philosophical construct.

So how does Tsongkhapa explain the seemingly natural sense of self we relate to? The ‘I’ we use in everyday language? Does this sense of selfhood not exist separate from our body and mind? In these cases, such as when I say ‘my head hurts’, I am treating a part of the body (one of the aggregates) as though it were a possession, separate from myself. However, contrary to my apprehension of an ‘I’ essentially distinct from my head, Tsongkhapa says that this sense of a self separate from the aggregates has no ground in experience and reflects our innate misapprehension of reality.<sup>49</sup> It is a mere imputation such as ‘table’ or ‘forest’ that we, ignorant of the true mode of reality, assign to our being. In reality, every time we can accurately say ‘I do, feel, think, etc. we are not relating to a metaphysical entity but to a mental or physical state of ourselves.’<sup>50</sup> Thus, ideas of the self as a distinct entity may simply arise from the failure to conceive the possibility that the self may be a mere nominal construct.<sup>51</sup>

### **Objections to Tsongkhapa’s argument**

We have now finished our presentation of Tsongkhapa’s argument. However, left here Tsongkhapa’s ideas are open to several objections. Tsongkhapa anticipates and answers most of these in his original works. However, there are a few objections Tsongkhapa’s philosophy does not answer unequivocally. I will explain and attempt to answer these drawing primarily from his

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 86.

philosophy. The first objection Tsongkhapa addresses himself: ‘What is memory if there is no enduring self that possesses it?’ Because we experience memory as part of our everyday experience, Tsongkhapa takes it for granted that it does occur.<sup>52</sup> Tsongkhapa also believes that any attempt to theorize about the phenomenon of memory outside of what is experienced is necessarily simply hypothesizing.<sup>53</sup> Because of this, he deals with memory as an experience, the only way he can deal with it without imputing unfounded hypotheses on it. Whereas it might seem that for a person to remember a particular experience years after its occurrence s/he would need some constant internal basis of recollection, Tsongkhapa shows that memory does not relate to an internal constant, but rather to an object of experience. For example, if I see an elephant at the age of ten, and remember it at the age of thirty, all that is established is that the object of my memory, the elephant, is present at both times.<sup>54</sup> This is all the phenomenon of memory implies, and our experience of it does not posit any substantially real, enduring entity at both the time of the initial experience and the time of the recollection.<sup>55</sup>

Tsongkhapa also addresses how the continuum of experience exists if there is no substantial self to experience it. His answer is that experience is like a river:

Like the continuum of a running stream, as it maintains a link through the relatedness of cause and effect, it abides uninterruptedly through birth and death leaving no gaps in between. It is a conditioned momentary event that appropriates [all] three temporal stages. Such a factor is called a continuum. The individual stages are not mere distinct points of preceding and succeeding instances with no gaps in between; rather, they form parts of the whole.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>56</sup> Trans. Ibid., 136.

Thus, a mental continuum does not require a permanent self because each thought is interconnected to the thoughts that precede and follow it. To fill out the analogy, our internal continuum is like a river: it is based on a flow of individual mental occurrences but does not have any existence over and above them. Just as a river cannot be said to exist separate from running water, the self cannot be said to exist separate from the continuum of mental and physical experiences.

We know Tsongkhapa claims that the essence-lessness of phenomena does not consign them to an illusory existence, but instead they only exist in an illusion-like way. As stated before, this plays a very positive role as it allows us to engage the world of dependent origination. Conventional being is possible precisely because it lacks intrinsic existence.<sup>57</sup> But this seems to raise another problem: ‘How is functionality possible in a fictional world?’<sup>58</sup> The answer is that functionality is possible because it operates on the same level as the world it operates in. For example, if I ask the question, ‘Did Sherlock Holmes pick up an apple?’ the question must be assessed in terms of the fictional world of Sherlock Holmes itself. If we try to ask this question outside the boundaries of the book our question is nonsensical. If we understand we are speaking within the context of the book we can answer this question truthfully. Likewise, if I say ‘Sherlock Holmes is a woman in America’ and ‘Sherlock Holmes is a detective in London’ one of these two statements can be established as true.<sup>59</sup> If I ask the same question outside Sherlock’s world the answer is that he is neither, but simply a fictional character in a storybook. This, again, brings out the principle distinction between conventional and ultimate truth. Because

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 165-6.

we exist within the conventional world we can now reengage it, and do so in a truthful and meaningful manner.

The next objection concerns Tsongkhapa's apparent position that because an intrinsically, self-defined self cannot be perceived it is negated. Tsongkhapa makes a clear distinction between 'that which is not found' and 'that which does not exist'.<sup>60</sup> This can also be stated as 'that which is negated by reasoning' and 'that which is not found through reasoning'. These two ideas are dramatically different. The first eliminates the existence of the object of analysis while the second merely states that the object cannot be found. This point is significant as analyses which seek to negate through reasoning, such as Tsongkhapa's analysis of the self, must actually negate the object. To do this, Tsongkhapa must show that the object of negation is generally perceptible through the means utilized by his argument and thus the absence of its perception, when looked for in the appropriate manner, can be taken as proof of its non-existence. For example, if I look for a book on my desk but do not find one I can safely say that there is no book that exists on my desk. However, if I am looking for a ghost on my desk and do not find it I cannot say that I have negated the possibility of a ghost on my desk.<sup>61</sup> This is because ghosts are not generally perceptible through my means of perception and so my failure to perceive means nothing in the context of their existence. So, in order to negate the existence of the intrinsic self through reasoned analysis Tsongkhapa must show that the self he is looking for is generally susceptible to rational inquiry. Or to put in a slightly more philosophically complex way, the self that is looked for must exist on the same plane that logical analysis operates on. In even other words, in

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>61</sup> Example taken from Thupten Jinpa, *Self, Reality and Reason in Tibetan Philosophy: Tsongkhapa's Quest for the Middle Way*, 54.

order for something to be negated by empirical means it follows that it must be empirical in nature.<sup>62</sup> So how does Tsongkhapa show that the self is susceptible to analysis?

Tsongkhapa does state that as proponents of the *ātman* theory are operating from the basic assumption that the self is distinct from the empirical facts of a person's existence it follows that the self must both be intrinsically existent and contain intrinsic identity.<sup>63</sup> This self must then contain an intrinsic nature that is self-enclosed and logically definable.<sup>64</sup> The consequence that follows is that this self must be perceivable separate from the aggregates. As this is not the case, Tsongkhapa concludes that a self separate from the aggregates does not exist.<sup>65</sup> This argument again relies on the claim that *ātman* must be logically definable. Here, Tsongkhapa's answer is more satisfactory as *ātman* theories of self, like those that comprise the first two perspectives of self discussed earlier<sup>66</sup> are based on logically defined conceptions of the self. However unimportant it may be at this point, the problem of 'that which is not found' and 'that which does not exist' remains relevant, however slightly, in these cases. In the case of the last perception of self, self as intrinsic nature, Tsongkhapa's answer is not as satisfactory because many theories of intrinsic nature do not necessarily restrict their depictions of the self to logically definable conceptions. This may very well be one reason belief in intrinsic nature, framed as *Tathāgatagarbha* or Buddha-nature, remained prevalent among other schools of Tibetan Buddhism. Unfortunately, a thorough analysis of these conceptions of intrinsic nature and their

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<sup>62</sup> The reason for this is that if an object is perceptible through logical analysis it follows that the object must be, in some way, logical in nature. Thus, the object must exist on the same plane logical analysis operates on.

<sup>63</sup> Thupten Jinpa, *Self, Reality and Reason in Tibetan Philosophy: Tsongkhapa's Quest for the Middle Way*, 84.

<sup>64</sup> Tsongkhapa argues that any such metaphysical entity must necessarily possess these characteristics. Thupten Jinpa, *Self, Reality and Reason in Tibetan Philosophy: Tsongkhapa's Quest for the Middle Way*, 85.

<sup>65</sup> Thupten Jinpa, *Self, Reality and Reason in Tibetan Philosophy: Tsongkhapa's Quest for the Middle Way*, 85.

<sup>66</sup> These being unitary substance and self-sufficient self.

consequences lies outside the scope of this paper.<sup>67</sup> In relation to Tsongkhapa's desire for a complete negation of the self, this third conception seems to make him fall short of his goal.

To explain the point made above in more detail, within the *tetralemma* analysis of existence is relegated to a particular perspective of existence. Tsongkhapa's argument seems to require that the 'existence' of intrinsic self correspond to the ideas of existence we normally hold as a result of our experience in the empirical world and our linguistically-restricted thought processes. If, however, the 'existence' of intrinsic self lies outside the domain of our everyday empirical existence there is no substantial reason to assume that it must comply with the ways of being as we commonly experience them. In effect, intrinsic self could 'exist' in a way that we cannot conceive of using our normal, logically and empirically restricted definitions. Though I will say that if the self is beyond logically and empirically restricted definitions there would be absolutely no way of discussing it. Thus, any attempt to do so would be hypothetical and inaccurate as it would rely on a way of thinking that is necessarily incapable of accessing its subject. Still, here Tsongkhapa's philosophy seems weak as he provides no complete justification as to why intrinsic existence cannot exist outside the bounds of logical/empirical reality.

In response to this, as mentioned above, most if not all our conceptions of self hold that the self is real and within the bounds of logical and empirical reality. Tsongkhapa completely negates conceptions within these domains. Thus, his negation does most if not all the work. Furthermore, Tsongkhapa's method of negating through reasoning, which is the primary focus of this paper, is not his only method of negation. For Tsongkhapa, reason does the groundwork but meditation (or habituation) on the result of reasoned analysis into the lack of intrinsic self is

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<sup>67</sup> For a discussion of one such logically-unbound conception of Buddha-nature see: Douglas S. Duckworth, *Mipam on Buddha-Nature: The Ground of the Nyingma Tradition*, (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2008). This analysis specifically deals with the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism.

necessary to negate the more subtle notions of self that are more ingrained and instinctual. Here it is important to understand that for Tsongkhapa familiarization through meditation is not an altered state of mind as it is for many other Buddhist thinkers, but is rather a more thorough solidification of our understanding of *emptiness* through repeated analysis. In relation to familiarization, though the third conception of self as intrinsic nature seems to make Tsongkhapa fall short of his goal, perhaps we can say he addresses this issue by introducing a method of insight that can also go beyond logical analysis. This seems to be the reason Tsongkhapa says we must experientially familiarize ourselves with the lack of intrinsic self through meditative means; only through meditation can we transcend our strongly entrenched habits of assuming there to an ultimate self in when in fact there is none.

Tsongkhapa claims that *emptiness* cannot be fully cognized through analytical means but can only be fully realized through meditation. Here we are reminded that Tsongkhapa is attempting to explain a perspective on truth that he feels is essentially experiential in nature. He claims that one must experientially habituate oneself with the lack of intrinsic existence to truly understand *emptiness*, that no amount of verbal explanation from a third party will help us distinguish between conventional existence only and intrinsic existence.<sup>68</sup> To explain this one might think that Tsongkhapa would use the popular Tibetan distinction between intellectual knowledge and insight. According to this distinction, an individual would first develop an intellectual understanding of *emptiness* and then only after experientially deconstructing intrinsic existence would s/he gain insight into *emptiness*.<sup>69</sup> We might think of this as the “a ha” moment when you finally understand something even though you have ‘known’ it for a long time.

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 53.



Interestingly enough, Tsongkhapa does not use this distinction, or any other argument, to prove his point. Perhaps this is because no argument, no matter how well constructed, can prove the existence of experience.

Still, on several levels Tsongkhapa shows that belief in an existent self is illogical. Tsongkhapa's arguments show that in any way we empirically observe the world no intrinsic self can be found. Thus, those who assume that the self exists on some other plane that is not susceptible to reasoned analysis are merely assuming its existence from no logically defensible standpoint. In essence, because reasoned analysis shows that the self cannot be shown to exist and that nowhere in reality it is evident, those who maintain its existence are simply assuming. Thus, maintaining belief in intrinsic existence after a thorough analysis is, like Tsongkhapa says, a result of personal discomfort with the idea that reality has no underlying and unchanging substance.

My last objection is that according to Tsongkhapa's description of dependent origination and causality, a person would be completely and exclusively the result of his/her past experiences, environments, choices, and so on and thus would have no freedom of choice. The complex web of interactions that have influenced our lives up to any particular point predispose us to the exact physical and mental states we now have. My body is only the result of what it has been exposed to it is completely formed by its factors of origination, including my past environments and actions. For example, my body's accumulated muscle mass, dietary health, and even location as I am sitting here writing, completely result from my past influences. In much the same way, my current mental state is the direct and exclusive result of all my past mental states and mental influences. For the purposes of this critique, let us now introduce an omniscient calculator. Because this calculator knows the totality of all my past influences and

their results on my current mental and physical state, it would be able to, in any particular moment, ‘calculate’ the equation of my past inputs and thus know the exact decision they will lead me to make in any particular situation. This would seem to remove any possibility for individual freedom of choice. We would be determined towards particular choices by the totality of our factors of origination. But this seems to go against our common experience of things. It seems to me that right now I have a choice of whether to raise my right hand or my left, or to do some other action. Yet, the reason raising a hand comes to mind in the first place is because my past influences predispose me to think of it. In this way, yet again, it seems that my mental and physical inputs both dictate what options I think of, as well as which one I will choose.

So how are we to handle this? Of course I will not have full freedom of choice, my current capabilities are restricted by my past choices, actions, and environments, but I still seem to have at least some degree of freedom. However, my feeling of partial freedom of choice may simply be the result of my inability to directly access the hypothetical omniscient calculator of our discussion. Because I cannot see the calculation in its entirety, but only narrow parts, I can see that I am predisposed for certain choices but still feel I retain some degree of freedom of choice. Left at this point, it seems that if one is to accept the totality of Tsongkhapa’s philosophical system s/he must also uphold the position that sentient beings have no freedom of choice. But this seems absurd. If there were not at least partial freedom of choice the entire Buddhist ethical and religious system would collapse as we would have no control over our karmic formations and thus our future states of being would be dictated not by us but by the overall web of origination. Buddhists at large, and Tsongkhapa in particular, do not hold this position.

There are three main grounds, or bodies of evidence, from which to approach this issue: personal experience, reasoned analysis, and tradition. First, throughout Tsongkhapa's philosophy he accepts personal experience that is not contradicted by another conventionally valid cognition as valid evidence for conventional existence. My personal experience seems to suggest that I do have partial freedom of choice. However, this perception cannot be taken as valid evidence because it, again, could simply be the result of my inability to access the omniscient calculator of our discussion. Second, in relation to reasoned analysis, Tsongkhapa's arguments are highly complex and do not settle the dispute unequivocally. One can reason both sides of this issue with equally effective results; on the side of behavioral determinism is the critique as raised above and on the side of partial freedom of choice is the claim that some factors such as intention can guide choices from within the web of dependent origination. Within his philosophical system Tsongkhapa decisively settles this issue by discussing intention. Here, intention is a mental formation, one of the five aggregates, and is thus subject to dependent origination. However, the core of Tsongkhapa's acceptance that intention exists is based on his religious tradition and personal experience.

The third body of evidence is tradition. Buddhist scriptures describe that individuals have the ability to make choices and therefore create their own actions (*karma*). This is the underlying ground of Tsongkhapa's acceptance that we still maintain partial freedom of choice. It is precisely because we have freedom of intention and partial freedom of choice that we can be liberated, the ultimate goal from a Buddhist perspective. Likewise, if there were no such thing as partial freedom of choice or intention then all attempts to seek liberation through religions, spiritual, or ethical means would be meaningless. Liberation would rely simply on the chance alignment of the necessary factors. According to the traditional body of evidence, these reasons

are why dependent origination cannot be deterministic; the Buddha became liberated by his own effort and we can follow in his stead. As this discussion makes obvious, it is important to remember that Tsongkhapa is not a philosopher simply discussing these issues, he is a Buddhist thinker whose goal is liberation and thus appeals to some of the fundamental presuppositions of the Buddhist worldview.

Perhaps there is a more appropriate and generally acceptable answer to the claim that Tsongkhapa's *emptiness* and dependent origination is deterministic, though it is not one Tsongkhapa himself provides. Because we do not have access to the hypothetical calculator, for us, it is the same as if it does not exist. Within the context of our existence, because there is no calculator to determine our choices it is the same as if they were not determined. Even further, the potential of calculating our future choices becomes irrelevant as we could never know the calculated choice. All we are left with is a sense of partial freedom of choice with the understanding that our past influences significantly curtail and guide our actions. From this perspective, if we choose to accept that dependent origination determines our behavior we are disempowering ourselves for no substantial reason. In our everyday, conventional world partial freedom of choice is a reality. Choice is fundamental to our existence and if we deny it we risk upsetting one of the most fundamental aspects of our ways of thought and being. Finally, as our only reason to believe we are determined towards particular choices is a philosophical argument that both requires a theoretical agent with omniscient knowledge and does not agree with our phenomenal experience of reality, we might as well act as if we do have partial freedom of choice because if we cease to do so we accomplish nothing but potentially degrading our quality of life.

Although thus far I have only assessed Tsongkhapa's position through philosophical critiques, it is important to remember that his philosophical system cannot be abstracted from his spiritual world or historical environment and still retain its focus and purpose. Thus, an assessment, however brief, of Tsongkhapa's environments and motives is an essential aspect of any discussion dealing with his philosophy. For Tsongkhapa, negating the existence of intrinsic self through critical analysis is only the first step in the process of deepening one's insight into the ultimate reality of things.<sup>70</sup> Tsongkhapa believes that deepening one's understanding of *emptiness* will naturally lead to deepening one's belief in the principles of *karma*, or causation, and increasing compassionate and ethical behavior.<sup>71</sup> Tsongkhapa's primary objective is to provide a philosophical system through which we can free ourselves from attachment and clinging and thus eliminate suffering. These are the reasons Tsongkhapa addresses the issue of *emptiness*; his aims are ethical rather than solely philosophical. This is significant insofar as it not only colors his views on the subject, but also defines the way he approaches *emptiness* as well as dictates the issues he sees fit to discuss.

Finally, as with all systems of thought, Tsongkhapa's historical environment is an essential part of any investigation into his philosophy. In particular, Tsongkhapa's socio-historical context led him to choose which topics were important enough to discuss and how to address them. Tsongkhapa is responding to the philosophical positions of other schools. This is extremely important as the topics he discusses, the points he makes, and the philosophy that leads up to them, are chosen by his desire to refute these positions. In a way, Tsongkhapa's desire to refute other schools largely structures his arguments. This can easily be seen in his

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<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

delineation of the self into three separate conceptions: unitary substance, self-sufficient self, and intrinsic nature. The last conception is a direct response to the belief in intrinsic nature many other Mahāyāna schools had adopted. Thus, though a complete analysis of Tsongkhapa's philosophy from the perspective of his historical environment is not included here, it remains a fundamental aspect of the philosophy itself.

### **Why is this discussion important?**

In the end, establishing *emptiness* and dependent origination is important for several reasons. First, from a Buddhist perspective, it eliminates the sense of self that is the source of both afflictive emotions and the suffering that arises from misperceiving reality.<sup>72</sup> Second, dependent origination helps us better understand the process of causality. Along with the external effects of our actions, because our current mental state is dependently arisen out of our experiences, thoughts, and our interpretations of them, it makes sense that our past actions impact our person. The results of these impacts can be seen through analyzing our emotional tendencies and habits.<sup>73</sup> Thirdly, Tsongkhapa's philosophy can be understood as a middle way between eternalism and nihilism. This includes nihilism through repudiation, nihilism through reification, and nihilism through belief in intrinsic existence.<sup>74</sup> For Tsongkhapa it is of the utmost

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<sup>72</sup> "...contemplation on it [*emptiness*] can become a powerful antidote against all thoughts manifestly attached to the notion of self-existence." Thupten Jinpa, *Self, Reality and Reason in Tibetan Philosophy: Tsongkhapa's Quest for the Middle Way*, 182.

<sup>73</sup> Thupten Jinpa, *Self, Reality and Reason in Tibetan Philosophy: Tsongkhapa's Quest for the Middle Way*, 137.

<sup>74</sup> Nihilism through repudiation is nihilism that repudiates all existence, nihilism through reification is nihilism by reifying *emptiness* and so negating even conventional existence, and nihilism through belief in intrinsic existence is nihilism insofar that if one holds things are intrinsically existent then one must also hold that the only change

importance that people understand that *emptiness* does not equal nihilism. Although he maintains that analysis into the ultimate nature of things negates the idea that they exist intrinsically, it does not, and cannot, negate conventional existence. Everything is empty of intrinsic existence only, and as such, the conventional existence of dependent origination is not empty.

For Tsongkhapa, negating the existence of intrinsic existence through critical analysis is only the first step in the process of deepening one's insight into the ultimate reality of things.<sup>75</sup> This analysis can only go so far and must eventually be accompanied by the experiential meditative state of non-dual *emptiness*. Only then can one gain insight into ultimate reality and transcend the suffering that is caused by mental and physical attachments. Before we reach this point, Tsongkhapa understood that by deepening our understanding of *emptiness* through analytical means we can begin to free ourselves from attachment to an absolute and to the objects of everyday experience.<sup>76</sup> This leads to a remarkable outcome and is the primary aim of Tsongkhapa's philosophy; to correct our view of the world through understanding reality in a way that eliminates the suffering caused by our attachments while increasing our compassion for all.

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which can occur to them is total cessation. Thupten Jinpa, *Self, Reality and Reason in Tibetan Philosophy: Tsongkhapa's Quest for the Middle Way*, 171-2.

<sup>75</sup> Thupten Jinpa, *Self, Reality and Reason in Tibetan Philosophy: Tsongkhapa's Quest for the Middle Way*, 182.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

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