Untamed Nirvāṇa

A Journey Through the Wilds of Indo-Tibetan Soteriology

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Clouds I cannot lose, we cannot leave.
We learn to love, horror accepted.
Beyond, within, all normal beauties
Of the science-conscious sex and love-receiving
Day-to-day got vision of this sick
Sparkling person at the interned dreaming
Blooming human mind
Dropping it all, and opening the eyes.

—Gary Snyder, *Maudgalyāyana Saw Hell*

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements .... **iv**

I. Point of Departure **1**

1. The Question *2*

2. Chapter Summary *34*

II. Unconditioned **39**

1. Unanswered Questions & King Milinda's Mango *42*

2. Conditioning & the Unconditioned *46*

3. Negative Nirvāṇa *70*

III. Empty **79**

1. The Middle Way *83*

2. Freedom from Suffering *108*

3. Conclusion *124*

IV. Transcendence **127**

1. Transcendence of What? *130*

2. What does Transcendence Mean? *154*

3. Conclusion *167*

V. Immanence........ 170

1. The 'Why' Question........ 173

2. Non-duality of Saṃsāra & Nirvāṇa........ 183

3. Conclusion........ 209

VI. Conclusion........ 213

1. Where We've Come........ 213

2. The Trouble with Naturalism........ 218

3. A Crossroads........ 222

Abbreviations of Indian Texts........ 224

Abbreviations of Tibetan Texts........ 226

Primary Works Cited........ 228

Secondary Sources........ 235

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I. Point of Departure

The Buddha taught that we are to recognize suffering, find its cause, and then practice the path in order to pull it out by the root. This is Buddhist soteriology in a nutshell.[1] According to this overarching and overwhelmingly influential structure of the Four Noble Truths, suffering is the problem and the Buddhist path, along with Buddhist practices, texts, and even institutions, is supposed to lead us to the solution.[2] This much seems relatively clear. What is not clear—and what has been endlessly controversial for as long as Buddhist philosophers have been arguing with each other—is what the solution is supposed to be.[3] What does it mean to have "eliminated" suffering? Was it tossed out, like yesterday's garbage? Pummeled it, like an enemy? Seen through, as we might a paranoia or obsession? Accepted, like living with a terminal diagnosis?

When we put it in the language of Buddhist texts, the question becomes, "What is nirvāṇa?"[4] There is a descriptive, historical, way of asking this question which would lead us to survey the seemingly infinite number of ways in which Buddhists across traditions and epochs have thought

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[1] Here and in the chapters that follow, in keeping with nomenclature of later commentators, where Sūtras identify the speaker as the "Buddha," I too shall be referring to the speaker in this way.

For discussions of "soteriology" as an analytic concept for interpreting Buddhist texts, see Spiro, *Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and Its Burmese Vicissitudes*, 12; Buswell and Gimello, "Introduction," 2 & 31 fn.2; Hopkins, "A Tibetan Perspective on the Nature of Spiritual Experience," 225–27; Gayley, "Soteriology of the Senses in Tibetan Buddhism," 466 fn.20.

[2] Gowans, *Philosophy of the Buddha*, 31

[3] Welbon, "On Understanding the Buddhist Nirvāṇa," 300 ff.

[4] For more general discussions of the concept of nirvāṇa, see Obermiller, *Nirvāṇa in Tibetan Buddhism*; Stcherbatsky, *The Conception of Buddhist Nirvāna*; La Vallée Poussin, *The Way to Nirvāṇa: Six Lectures on Ancient Buddhism as a Discipline of Salvation*; Cousins, "Nibbana and Abhidhamma"; Harvey, *The Selfless Mind: Personality, Consciousness and Nirvana in Early Buddhism*; Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities: Utopias of the Pali Imaginaire*; Hwang, *Metaphor and Literalism in Buddhism: The Doctrinal History of Nirvana*; Collins, *Nirvana: Concept, Imagery, Narrative*.

about nirvāṇa. The picture that would emerge from such an ambitious project would be a brilliant pattern of differing orientations and perspectives, each with their own historical trajectories and local contexts.

1. The Question

There is also, however, a philosophical version of this question.[5] Normatively speaking, what ought to be our solution to the problem of suffering? In what follows, I will be talking about this question in terms of "nirvāṇa"—"what is nirvāṇa?"—since that is the term used in the texts I am interpreting. *But*, whenever it feels like we are on the verge of debating angels on a pin, be sure to translate the nirvāṇa question back to this very basic question: "What does it mean to get rid of suffering?"[6]

More specifically, at the heart of this question is whether we get rid of suffering by transcending our finitude, or do we do so through an immanent transformation within the ephemeral present? Is suffering eliminated "here and now" in this body, in this life in all of its dappled particularity?[7] Or do you get rid of suffering by forever leaving behind all that is conditioned and impermanent? Although, in subsequent chapters, I will show how variants of this doubt dogged Buddhist soteriological reflection from the beginning, it is a contemporary version of this question that makes our inquiry so pressing.

Many modern Buddhists know where they stand on this question. It is a particular breed of modernism, Buddhist naturalism, along with its cousin, Secular Buddhism, that I will introduce

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[5] Ram-Prasad, *Knowledge and Liberation in Classical Indian Thought*, 1.

[6] Cf. Sharf, "Is Nirvāṇa the Same as Insentience?: Chinese Struggles with an Indian Buddhist Ideal," 144.

[7] Hopkins, "Pied Beauty," 30.

shortly and that will be my interlocuter throughout, but, for now, I just want you to get a purchase on the basic intuition at play here: *What matters are the things of this life.*[8] You can cash this out anyway you want—happiness, personal growth, mystical experiences, or ethical behavior—the measure of value must be within the biological parameters of this life, somewhere between the placenta and the grave. It is, consequently, understandable that, through modern eyes, transcendence of this life appears meaningless at best, if not disturbing or ethically abhorrent, not to mention epistemically suspect.

Buddhist texts tend to offer an altogether different picture. Transcendence of this life, or of any conditioned existence for that matter, was of the utmost importance for Buddhist soteriology as we find in it premodern Buddhist texts. In the next chapter I will try to give you a feel for why Indian and Tibetan Buddhist philosophers in particular were so unequivocal in their insistence that this life must be transcended, that cessation of suffering meant eliminating conditioned (*saṃskṛta*) existence. This deep tension between how Buddhist modernists think about nirvāṇa and what we find in Buddhist texts, however, is not in itself particularly remarkable. Buddhist modernists are often well aware of this tension and, even if they weren't, there is ample scholarly work available to drive the point home.[9]

What has gone unnoticed is how we have approached these questions around the elimination of suffering by assuming that they have answers, in the normal sense. Let me explain by way of example: Consider the difference between Lenin's baldness and baldness of the present King of

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[8] For a discussion of Buddhist modernism, see McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*; for an insightful reflection on the ethics and politics that come with this immanent intuition, see Hägglund, *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom*.

[9] Flanagan, *The Bodhisattva's Brain: Buddhism Naturalized*, 23; Flanagan, "Buddhism and the Scientific Image: Reply to Critics"; Wright, *Why Buddhism Is True: The Science and Philosophy of Meditation and Enlightenment*, 216; Batchelor, *After Buddhism: Rethinking the Dharma for a Secular Age*, 133 & 135.

France, that most prestigious and philosophically debated of all nonexistent persons.[10] The question of how Lenin might have cured his baldness is answered with specifics about the availability of medications and hair transplants in Bolshevik Russia. You can answer the question within its own parameters. Not so when it comes to helping the present King of France—to offer him a new shampoo is to miss the point, precisely because he does not exist. Instead, this sort of question is only addressed by undermining its premises. You can only "solve" the problem by pointing out that, in fact, there is no reigning French monarch. We find this same ambiguity surrounding the question of what it means to get rid of suffering. Is there a solution to the problem of suffering to be found within the parameters of the question? Or is this too the sort of problem that is resolved by undermining the question's premises?

The idea that there is suffering that can be removed is precisely the sort of assumption that a great deal of Mahāyāna soteriological reflection was intended to uproot.[11] If early Buddhists were committed to the hard work of untying the knot of suffering, for these Mahāyāna philosophers, the problem was but "a knot tied with space, undone just by space."[12] As we shall see, according to the view of many Indian and Tibetan Buddhist philosophers, in the reality in which suffering is

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[10] Russell, "On Denoting," 479; Smart, *Doctrine and Argument in Indian Philosophy*, 20.

[11] For scholarship on the origins of the Mahāyāna and its cogency as an analytical category, see Davids, *Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion as Illustrated by Some Points in the History of Indian Buddhism*; Hirakawa, "The Rise of Mahayana Buddhism and Its Relationship to the Worship of Stupas," 243 ff.; Schopen, "The Phrase *'sa Pṛthivīpradeśaś Caityabhūto Bhavet'* in the *' 'Vajracchedikā'*: Notes on the Cult of the Book in Mahāyāna"; Harrison, "Who Gets to Ride in the Great Vehicle? Self-Image and Identity Among the Followers of the Early Mahāyāna"; Hirakawa, *A History of Indian Buddhism: From Śākyamuni to Early Mahāyāna*; Harrison, "Searching for the Origins of the Mahāyāna: What Are We Looking For?"; Silk, "What, If Anything, Is Mahāyāna Buddhism? Problems of Definitions and Classifications"; Harrison, "Mediums and Messages: Reflections on the Production of Mahāyāna Sūtras"; Nattier, *A Few Good Men: The Bodhisattva Path According to* The Inquiry of Ugra (Ugraparipṛcchā); Drewes, "Early Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism I: Recent Scholarship"; Drewes, "Early Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism II: New Perspectives: Early Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism II"; Drewes, "The Problem of Becoming a Bodhisattva and the Emergence of Mahāyāna," 158.

[12] An image from the *Avaivartikacakra Sūtra* (F.175a) quoted in PsP, 540: *ākāśena kṛto granthir ākāśenaiva mocitaḥ*. For discussion of this image and its textual variants, see Apple, "The Knot Tied with Space": Notes on a Previously Unidentified Stanza in Buddhist Literature and Its Citation.," 168 ff.

eliminated—or, more precisely, never existed—the assertion and denial of continued embodied existence are equally inapplicable. While these philosophers continued to hold that assertions, denials, and soteriological theories were still important, on their view the problem of suffering is to be solved by questioning the premises within which it emerges as a problem. There is no medication to treat the baldness of a non-existent king, the solution is to reject the premise of the problem. Likewise, there is no technique to get rid of suffering, the solution is to see that there is no suffering to be eliminated.

This is the real question at the heart of many of the most influential strands of Buddhist soteriological reflection. According to a standard style of Buddhist soteriology that was widespread by the time of these Mahāyāna philosophers, when you get to nirvāṇa, the soteriological ladder stays in place in so far as this final vantage point or ultimate perspective does not undermine your starting point. This approach solves the problem of suffering by getting rid of the suffering, not by denying that it ever existed. In contrast, according to the influential rival view that I am pointing to here, not only is the ladder kicked away upon attaining nirvāṇa, to borrow an image from Wittgenstein, more paradoxically, kicking it away is precisely what constitutes the freedom towards which the path is intended.[13]

What this means is that our inquiry into what constitutes the elimination of suffering, concerns about immanence and transcendence included, must above all else grapple with this question of whether eliminating suffering is about letting go of what I will call "frameworks." In subsequent chapters, I will get into the details of how, and in what terms, particular Buddhist philosophers thought about frameworks, but in order to begin our inquiry with some analytic clarity, let's simply

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[13] Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 6.54. The rival view, first and foremost, is Madhyamaka, a Buddhist philosophical school which I will introduce properly in Chapter Three.

say that a "framework" consists in an orderly and intelligible arrangement of concepts and language that serves various explanatory and predictive purposes.[14] As such, saying that suffering is eliminated by discarding the framework of the question can mean rejecting any framework that assumes the existence of suffering, a fairly standard feature of most frameworks. Or more ambitiously, it can mean that the very idea of a framework is part of the problem of suffering, such that all frameworks must be abandoned, even those that deny suffering or assert that it is empty. A bit further along, I will explain how Mahāyāna philosophers dealt with both of these versions. The task and contribution of this study is to develop this point, show its philosophical importance for Buddhist soteriology, and reflect on its implications for our question of what it means to get rid of suffering.

1.1. Pāramitā or "the Other Shore"

The question of whether the problem of suffering is to be resolved by rejecting its initial premise emerges, perhaps even more clearly, in the relation between where we are and where we end up—what Buddhist texts call "this shore" and the "other shore" or *pāramitā.* Candrakīrti, a 7th century Indian Buddhist philosopher, who in many ways is one of the heroes of the following story, explains the term etymologically:

> "*Pāra*" refers to the further (*para*) shore (*tīra*) of the ocean of saṃsāra. Awakening (*buddhatva*) is to have completely eliminated *kleśa* obscurations (*kleśāvaraṇa*) and cognitive obscurations (*jñeyāvaraṇa*).[15] As such, having gone

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[14] Although I am borrowing the term "frameworks" from Charles Taylor, when Clifford Geertz famously defines religion as "formulating conceptions of general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an order of factuality," this also comes very close to the way I am using the term (Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 13; Geertz, "Religion as Cultural System," 349).

[15] I explain kleśa and the difference between these two types of obscurations (*āvaraṇa*) in §2 below.

> (*ita*) to the opposite shore (*pāra*), in the sense of having arrived, it [i.e., Awakening] is '*pāramitā.*'[16]

To fill out the analogy, we are on this shore but, with practice and the right techniques, we can cross over to the opposite shore. That is our goal. The teaching of the Buddha is supposed be just the thing for the job, hence the famous simile of the dharma as a raft for crossing a river.[17] Put in these terms, our question about how to resolve suffering is also a question about what changes when you get to this other shore.

In order to get a sense of the possibilities, let us start with one very standard way of thinking about it. The other shore offers a superior vantage point. Perhaps you and I are lost in the woods, looking for the nearest road, when we come upon a river. We can hear the whizzing of the cars, so the road can't be far off, but is it upstream or down? I say it's one way, you say it's the other. The shore we are on is crowded with riparian undergrowth, and river birch leaning out over the river further block our view. To get a better view of things, you cross over on your makeshift raft, while I stay back with the bags. Once you get to the other shore, there is so much you can see that I cannot. You see that there is a clearing not far off and most importantly, that the road is upstream just within sight. What I want us to notice is how, in this scenario, your perspective from the other side settles our disagreement one way or the other.

Let's call this the "classical" version insofar as it is pervasive in many of the earliest and most authoritative strata of Buddhist philosophical texts. I will nuance which texts and in what ways further along, as we get into the real thick of our analysis, but, for now, understand that, according to this model, even though an Awakened perspective goes far beyond our knowledge and,

[16] All translations, unless otherwise specified, are my own. MABh(X), 24: *pāram ucyate / saṃsārārṇavasya yat paraṃ tīraṃ niravaśeṣakleśajñeyāvaraṇaprahāṇarūpaṃ buddhatvam / pāram itā gatā pāramiteti.* Lopez offers a useful overview of *pāramitā* etymologies (*The Heart Sūtra Explained:Indian and Tibetan Commentaries*, 21).

[17] MN *i*, 134.

crucially, sees through many of our misapprehensions, it also affirms our starting point. We started on the path with the assumption that we had some suffering to deal with. Now that you're on the other shore looking back, wiping your hands approvingly after a job well done, you can see that this was indeed the problem. What matters most about this version for our question, however, is that from the Awakened perspective of the Buddha, suffering can be eliminated using the right sort of techniques, like Lenin's baldness or weeds in the vegetable garden. Our questions of whether getting rid of suffering involves leaving this body and life behind turn out to be the sorts of questions that have straightforward answers.

Now, for an altogether different approach, imagine that when you cross the river the hallucinogen we both took finally clears your system, although I am still caught in the midst of it. You begin to remember how we got here, but I am still caught in the hallucinogenic phenomenology of the present, sweaty, on the banks of this massive river, being eaten by monstrous mosquitos, worried about ever finding the road. When you get to the other side, suitably sobered, you look back at me with new eyes. You laugh as you see that we're squatting on the shoulder of some county Highway, the "river" was a drainage ditch running along the road, no deeper than your calf. You could have walked to the other side. You see that there are no woods. Nor are there any mosquitos.

Unlike the classical version, your perspective from the other shore undermines your starting point. From the perspective from the other side, our doubt about whether the road was upstream or downstream makes no sense—there is no stream relative to which it could be either, and we are already sitting on the side of the Highway. According to this way of thinking, arriving at the other shore is constituted by a radical epistemic shift that calls into question everything we took for granted on this shore. And, most of all, from the standpoint of the other shore, we see through the

soteriological premises that motivated our journey, namely the idea that there is suffering and a solution to suffering. The fact that Buddhist philosophers of many stripes across many epochs thought of the other shore in precisely such terms is perhaps, more than anything else, what distinguishes their style of soteriological reflection.[18]

My overarching point in what follows is that when we ask about what it means to get rid of suffering, to really grapple with the underlying issues, we must start by asking whether we are dealing with a problem that is to be solved within in its own framework. Is it possible that the problem of suffering is one of those things that can only be resolved by suspending the framework within which it is intelligible?

1.2. The Stakes

How to understand the elimination of suffering is at the crux of contemporary debates about the direction to take Buddhist thought and practice. Or, to put it in more personal terms, at the crux of how the contemporary Buddhist "seeker" ought to tackle the problem of suffering. Since, on any normative account of Buddhist practice, freedom from suffering is the purpose of the whole endeavor, at stake is the question of why one should practice the Buddhist path. It is here that we feel the full force of our worries about immanence and transcendence—ought one practice for the sake of improving the quality of one's life or is the real point to transcend such concerns?

There is a more or less philosophical version of this debate centered on whether Buddhist doctrine ought to be "naturalized" or parsed down until it is intelligible within a modern, largely scientific, empirical framework. At stake in this debate is the shape and structure of a

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[18] Ziporyn, *Emptiness and Omnipresence: An Essential Introduction to Tiantai Buddhism*, Ch.2; Ziporyn, "A Comment on 'the Way of the Dialetheist: Contradictions in Buddhism,' by Yasuo Deguchi, Jay L. Garfield, and Graham Priest," 345.

contemporary, philosophically defensible, version of Buddhist philosophy.[19] Is the bit of Buddhist thought that we are supposed to take seriously simply a matter of meditation and mind-science? Do the essential insights of Buddhist thought in fact shine more brightly in a purely empirical framework?[20]

I am going to talk more about Buddhist naturalism and then explain why our questions concerning the elimination of suffering are at the crux of it, but first we should note how the questions that I hash out in my arguments with naturalists are felt even more keenly—albeit in a looser form—in the debates that grip popular forms of Western Buddhism. On one side of these debates, we find Secular Buddhism, which appears less concerned with scientific credibility and more concerned with offering a version of the Buddhist path that is intelligible and effective for contemporary folks.[21] Where Buddhist naturalists are making a relatively more precise claim that Buddhist doctrine needs to be brought in line with empirical evidence, since Secular Buddhists seek to adapt traditional outlooks and practices so that they make more sense to "us," their task is essentially to find what works with what they see as our contemporary intuitions.

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[19] Flanagan, *The Bodhisattva's Brain: Buddhism Naturalized*; Lopez, *The Scientific Buddha: His Short and Happy Life*; Flanagan, "Buddhism and the Scientific Image: Reply to Critics"; Wright, *Why Buddhism Is True: The Science and Philosophy of Meditation and Enlightenment*; Faure, "Can (and Should) Neuroscience Naturalize Buddhism?"; Westerhoff, "Buddhism without Reincarnation? Examining the Prospects of a 'Naturalized' Buddhism"; Faure, "Can (and Should) Neuroscience Naturalize Buddhism?"; Thompson, *Why I Am Not a Buddhist*; Thompson, "Buddhist Philosophy and Scientific Naturalism," 3; Coseru, "The Middle Way to Reality: On Why I Am Not a Buddhist and Other Philosophical Curiosities"; Garfield, "Throwing out the Buddha with the Offering Water: Comments on Evan Thompson's Why I Am Not a Buddhist," 22; Garfield, *Buddhist Ethics: A Philosophical Exploration*, 172.

[20] What I present here is not the only possible way of thinking about naturalizing Buddhism—one might also try to wed Buddhist thought with a weaker and, it would seem, more appropriate sort of naturalism as Jay Garfield, for instance, has suggested ("Throwing out the Buddha with the Offering Water: Comments on Evan Thompson's Why I Am Not a Buddhist").

[21] Batchelor, *Buddhism without Beliefs: A Contemporary Guide to Awakening*; Baumann, "Global Buddhism: Developmental Periods, Regional Histories, and a New Analytical Perspective"; McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 244 ff; Batchelor, *Confession of a Buddhist Atheist*; McMahan, "The Enchanted Secular: Buddhism and the Emergence of Transtraditional 'Spirituality'"; Harris, *Waking up: A Guide to Spirituality without Religion*; Batchelor, *After Buddhism: Rethinking the Dharma for a Secular Age*; Bodhi, "Manifesting the Buddha Dharma in a Secular Age"; Payne, "Editor's Introduction," 10 ff.

In what follows, I too will be helping myself to some rough and ready assumptions about what "our" contemporary intuitions are, so identifying just whom I have in mind is critical. While there is an important sense in which our gut intuitions about religion, meaning, and purpose were wrought from the historical collision of the Enlightenment rationalism and Romantic expressivism, it is also crucial to recognize that the influence of this particular form of modern subjectivity is experiencing unevenly in contemporary cultures.[22] What we find is that these intuitions which are characteristic of Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) societies are, in fact, profoundly uncharacteristic of how most humans experience modernity.[23] Even though I will start things off in conversation with Buddhist naturalism, in subsequent chapters I will return at times to Secular Buddhism, for the relevant intuitions of its largely "WEIRD" audience are reflected most clearly in that context.

1.2.1. A Sketch of Buddhist Naturalism

What is "Naturalism"? Loosely put, to be a naturalist is to believe that science has all the important answers that are to be had, or at least that it will in time. Science is our final framework of understanding, not to be replaced, undermined, or augmented with anything "unscientific." Getting from this slogan to something with real philosophical content is no easy task, however, since even within the confines of Analytic philosophy, the term "naturalism" is notoriously difficult to pin down.[24] The good news is that, to get to where we are going, we do not need much more than this

[22] Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*; Taylor, *A Secular Age*; McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 10–11; McMahan, "The Enchanted Secular: Buddhism and the Emergence of Transtraditional 'Spirituality,'" 206 ff.

[23] Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan, "The Weirdest People in the World?"; Henrich, *The WEIRDest People in the World: How the West Became Psychologically Peculiar and Particularly Prosperous*.

[24] Papineau offers a plausible explanation for this lack of clarity:

> I suspect the main reason for the terminological unclarity is that nearly everybody nowadays wants to be a 'naturalist' but the aspirants to the term nevertheless disagree widely on substantial questions of philosophical doctrine (Papineau, *Philosophical Naturalism*, 1).

rough approximation. Instead, simply bear in mind that, in one of its most influential forms, this general intuition is hammered into the methodological demand that our pursuit of knowledge, in any particular area or domain, must follow the approach of the empirical sciences.[25] And, in another influential form, naturalism amounts to the ontological claim that only scientific entities are real, a position that generally amounts to what is called "physicalism."[26]

Naturalism is so much the philosophical ideology of our epoch that, in an increasing number of domains, it is the uncontroversial starting point for any serious inquiry. Given the remarkable rapprochement between Buddhist traditions and contemporary culture in Europe and North America over the last several decades, it is no surprise that naturalizing Buddhism has such

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For discussions of the terminological ambiguity, see Strawson, *Skepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties*, 1; Flanagan, "Varieties of Naturalism," 1; De Caro, *Naturalism and Normativity*, 2; Papineau, "Naturalism," 1; Nagel, *Logic without Metaphysics: And Other Essays in the Philosophy of Science*, 3; Putnam, "The Content and Appeal of 'Naturalism,'" 59; Horwich, "Naturalism and the Linguistic Turn," 38; Bryant, "Naturalisms," 35; Stroud, "The Charm of Naturalism," 21.

[25] For any careful consideration of the possible rapprochement between Buddhist philosophy and some form of naturalism, it is crucial to distinguish the *methodological naturalism* I am talking about here from *epistemological naturalism*, most famously Quine's arguments that epistemological questions of justification should be dropped in favor of psychological inquiries into the process of knowing (Quine, "Epistemology Naturalized"; Kim, "What Is 'Naturalized Epistemology?'"; Stroud, "The Charm of Naturalism," 24–26; Papineau, "Naturalism"). Some of the disagreements between scholars of Buddhism about the desirability of reading Buddhist philosophy within a naturalistic framework arise out of a failure to make this distinction. So it is, for instance, that when Coseru argues that Buddhism ought to be "naturalized," more than anything else, what he is suggesting is that Buddhist epistemology be read as a form of naturalized epistemology (Coseru, "Naturalism and Intentionality: A Buddhist Epistemological Approach"; Coseru, *Perceiving Reality*; Coseru, "The Middle Way to Reality: On Why I Am Not a Buddhist and Other Philosophical Curiosities"). Since Buddhist epistemologists do not analyze knowledge through normative notions of justification, this approach has some promise (Garfield, *Buddhist Ethics: A Philosophical Exploration*, 173). This should not suggest, however, that Buddhist thought is amenable to naturalism more generally, or to methodological naturalism specifically.

For discussions of this distinction between methodological and ontological naturalism, see Papineau, "Naturalism"; Thompson, "Buddhist Philosophy and Scientific Naturalism," 2. Likewise, for more in-depth discussions of what constitutes methodological naturalism, see Kim, "The American Origins of Philosophical Naturalism," 87; De Caro and Macarthur, *Naturalism in Question*, 7; Rosenberg, "Why I Am a Naturalist," 32.

[26] Even though there are ways in which ontological naturalism and physicalism can be distinguished, depending how each is defined, for our purposes they refer to the same types of views (Papineau, "Naturalism"). For discussions of ontological naturalism, see Kornblith, "Naturalism: Both Metaphysical and Epistemological," 40; Stroud, "The Charm of Naturalism," 22; Papineau, "Naturalism," 4 ff.

momentum. Since naturalism is obvious and Buddhism is awesome, how could we not try to wed them together?

Buddhist naturalism, the awkward child of this marriage, is the attempt to refine Buddhist thought down to its empirically credible essence. While "Buddhism" can just as easily refer to Burmese burial rituals or Tibetan magic, those aren't the bits that interest naturalists.[27] At stake, rather, are the normative understandings of the Buddhist path and goal, as they emerge in doctrinally focused Buddhist philosophical texts.[28] Insofar as the idea is to naturalize "Buddhism," in this normative sense of a path leading beyond suffering, the challenge for Buddhist naturalists is to come up with a scientifically respectable version of Buddhist soteriology. The upshot of this is that their project succeeds to the extent that the elimination of suffering can be naturalized. If other aspects of Buddhist thought and practice—particular epistemological approaches or certain meditation techniques—can be naturalized too, all the better.[29] What makes or breaks the project to naturalize Buddhism, however, is whether normative philosophical Buddhism's *raison d'être*, the elimination of suffering, makes sense within a naturalistic framework.

Furthermore, even if this weren't true, Buddhist naturalists are compelled to naturalize nirvāṇa by the nature of their project. Naturalism is more than simply making use of scientific insights and evidence—after all, who wouldn't want to do that? To naturalize any particular domain means to rely *exclusively* on either the methods or the ontology of science.[30] It would make no sense to say

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[27] Spiro, *Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and Its Burmese Vicissitudes*, 248; McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, Ch.2; Van Schaik, *Buddhist Magic*, Ch.4; Lopez, *The Scientific Buddha: His Short and Happy Life*, Ch.1.

[28] Flanagan, *The Bodhisattva's Brain: Buddhism Naturalized*, xi.

[29] Coseru, "Naturalism and Intentionality: A Buddhist Epistemological Approach"; Coseru, *Perceiving Reality*; Wright, *Why Buddhism Is True: The Science and Philosophy of Meditation and Enlightenment*; McMahan, *Rethinking Meditation: Buddhist Meditative Practice in Ancient and Modern Worlds*.

[30] Stroud, "The Charm of Naturalism," 27; Dupré, "The Miracle of Monism," 38 ff; Putnam, "The Content and Appeal of 'Naturalism,'" 60 ff.

that ethics, for instance, is to be naturalized, even while admitting that there are a certain moral facts that are only known *a priori*, independent of any inductive methods. To naturalize Buddhism but leave nirvāṇa untouched is to not naturalize it at all.

It should come as no surprise, therefore, that Buddhist naturalists do offer a naturalized version of what it means to get rid of suffering. Well aware that Buddhist texts abound in seemingly supernatural explanations of nirvāṇa, Owen Flanagan nicely distinguishes a "tame nirvāṇa," amenable to naturalistic explanation, from an "untame nirvāṇa" in which liberation occurs postmortem.[31] We will unpack what constitute this tame version further along but, in essence, the idea is that nirvāṇa should be understood as a psychological achievement.[32] As the title of this study suggests, over the course of the next several chapters, we will be reflecting on *untame* nirvāṇa as we find it described in Indian and Tibetan Buddhist texts and, along the way, I will be pointing to tensions and shortcomings in the naturalist's domesticated account.

Why Buddhist naturalism matters so much takes some explaining, particularly for those readers well versed in Buddhist texts. Buddhist naturalists are not good interpreters of Buddhism or, to put it more precisely, reading Buddhist texts through a naturalistic lens gives a profoundly distorted picture of their ideas and motivations. To state only the most obvious, karma and rebirth are central to Buddhist thought and practice in ways that naturalistic interpretations fail to capture, and that is

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Even though 'naturalizing' domain *x* generally amounts to the methodological claim that everything within *x* should be understand through inductive methods, dissatisfied with this impoverished approached, some philosophers have argued that this "restrictive naturalism" should be replaced with a "liberal naturalism" (Strawson, *Skepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties*, 1; McDowell, "Naturalism in the Philosophy of Mind," 95). What we find at play in Buddhist naturalism, however, are versions of restrictive or reductive naturalism.

[31] Flanagan, *The Bodhisattva's Brain: Buddhism Naturalized*, 22–23, 133–34. Note that Robert Wright makes nearly the same distinction between "exotic" and "naturalized" version Wright, *Why Buddhism Is True: The Science and Philosophy of Meditation and Enlightenment*, 216 ff.

[32] Flanagan, *The Bodhisattva's Brain: Buddhism Naturalized*, 22–23; Wright, *Why Buddhism Is True: The Science and Philosophy of Meditation and Enlightenment*, ch.14; Thompson, *Why I Am Not a Buddhist*, 81.

only the beginning.[33] Naturalistic interpretations of Buddhism are so obviously inaccurate that, for many academic interpreters of Buddhism, trained to read Buddhist texts historically in their original languages, it is difficult to take these naturalistic reconstructions as anything more than reflections of our own worldview.

This, however, is precisely why Buddhist naturalism matters so much—precisely because its proponents are asking whether Buddhist solutions to fundamental existential questions make sense through a modern lens.[34] So it is that Buddhist naturalism warrants our attention, not as a viable interpretation of premodern Buddhist texts, but as the yelp of the modern mind when it actually tries to take Buddhist thought as a viable philosophy of life. Buddhist naturalists speak to that precocious undergraduate, enrolled in Buddhism 101, trying to "figure it all out," to find meaningful answers to her existential questions, or to the "night table Buddhist," motivated by his worries about death and his desperation to find a path worth walking. Academic historians of Buddhism can challenge the assumptions and generalizations of such an audience, but the Buddhist naturalist offers a more appealing and immediate dive into the most basic and existentially pressing question we can bring to Buddhist texts: 'does this Buddhist solution to the problem of suffering make sense?' Yes, the naturalist's methods are anachronistic and ethnocentric, but if we are really asking whether nirvāṇa makes sense, aren't we, at the end of the day, asking whether it make sense

[33] Where ideas of karma and rebirth have an inordinate explanatory role in Indian and Tibetan Buddhist texts, in naturalistic interpretations, these beliefs must either be rejected out of hand or reinterpreted as jejune claims that our actions go on to influence others after our death (Flanagan, *The Bodhisattva's Brain: Buddhism Naturalized*, 131–33; Wright, "Critical Questions Towards a Naturalized Concept of Karma in Buddhism"; Carpenter, *Indian Buddhist Philosophy*, 111; Goodman, "Buddhism, Naturalism, and the Pursuit of Happiness," 224; Garfield, *Buddhist Ethics: A Philosophical Exploration*, 174). For a general discussion of rebirth across Buddhist contexts, see Jackson, *Rebirth: A Guide to Mind, Karma, and Cosmos in the Buddhist World*.

[34] Goodman, "Buddhism, Naturalism, and the Pursuit of Happiness," 221.

to us, in all of our peculiar modernity, armed with all the insights and scientific breakthroughs of the 21st century?[35]

1.2.2. A "Philosophical" Critique

At first blush, it is not obvious that eliminating suffering or obtaining nirvāṇa is where Buddhist naturalism falls apart, especially when we consider the Buddhist naturalist's inclination to interpret the end of suffering as a kind of psychological transformation. As I will show in subsequent chapters, there is an old and influential way of thinking about nirvāṇa in overtly psychological terms, and it would seem to be a small step from there to understanding freedom from suffering as a purely psychological achievement.[36] Not only does nirvāṇa seem *prima facie* amenable to naturalization, since the Buddhist naturalist's clarion call is to get rid of karma and rebirth, isn't this where the real issue lies?

How to interpret karma and rebirth in a way that makes sense in our context *is* important, and the naturalist's eliminativist approach *is* a point of genuine controversy.[37] However, that sort of debate about the status of particular Buddhist beliefs takes us far downstream of where, I am arguing, the fundamental tensions are to be found. By analogy, think about the kind of arguments you can have with a vaccine skeptic: you can and perhaps should argue about the particular bits of empirical evidence that undermines their claims but, at a certain point in this generally frustrating sort of debate, you are going to find that you and the skeptic have a more fundamental disagreement about how evidence is to be evaluated and what sorts of arguments are convincing. What I think you will find is that you can argue all day about the particular evidence about a particular vaccine,

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[35] Flanagan, *The Bodhisattva's Brain: Buddhism Naturalized*, 1.

[36] Flanagan, 22; Wright, *Why Buddhism Is True: The Science and Philosophy of Meditation and Enlightenment*, 216.

[37] Westerhoff, "Buddhism without Reincarnation? Examining the Prospects of a 'Naturalized' Buddhism," 147.

but you will simply go around in circles until you grapple with this more basic disagreement head-on.

Similarly, arguments about the merits and shortcomings of naturalizing karma and rebirth are all fine and good but, if the "traditional" Buddhist in this argument is anything like some of the philosophers we shall be discussing, until the question of frameworks is tackled directly, the real points of disagreement will remain obscure. To put the issue perhaps too simply, the naturalist's point is that we need to avoid beliefs in any supernatural sort of karma and rebirth because they fit poorly in a physicalist framework. Since Candrakīrti is arguing that freedom from suffering is a matter of transcending any framework, Buddhist ones included, to think their disagreement is just about the status of the supernatural is to miss the point. This is *not* to say that Candrakīrti didn't believe in karma and rebirth, or that he would in any way agree with the naturalist's rejection of these beliefs, any more than I would agree with my fellow countrymen's belief in Moderna microchips. The point, rather, is that these particular debates are downstream symptoms of more fundamental disagreements.

How to interpret the freedom from suffering is the question that brings us directly up against these fundamental disagreements. Since nirvāṇa, at least on many of the interpretations we shall be discussing, demands transcending frameworks, it is what reveals Buddhist naturalism's deep tensions, even incoherence. For the purposes of clearly laying out the issue, throughout this introduction I am presenting the problem through a Madhyamaka lens although, as we delve more deeply into Buddhist texts in later chapters, we will encounter many other Buddhist philosophical perspectives as well.[38] According to this influential strain of Buddhist soteriological thinking, the whole idea is to *undo* our frameworks.

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[38] Although I will introduce Madhyamaka more properly in Chapter 3, §1, for now, simply understand that "Madhyamaka" refers to an Indian school of Buddhist philosophy that became overwhelmingly influential in Tibet.

The trouble for Buddhist naturalists comes from the fact that they think the elimination of suffering must be understood *within* a scientific framework. The issue here is that, if we take Madhyamaka soteriological approaches seriously, the way to get rid of suffering is to arrive at the insight that there is ultimately no suffering and, perhaps, not anything else either. No eye, no ear, no nose (to quote the *Heart Sūtra*), but also no epistemic standards, no triumph of human reason, at least according to many of the interpretations that will be our focus in what follows.[39] The only way to "eliminate" suffering is to upend any framework that assumes the existence of suffering, scientific ones included.

At this point, let me distinguish where I am identifying the trouble for naturalism from another plausible approach according to which the basic tension is between realism and antirealism. It is possible that, just as an extreme form of metaphysical antirealism, this Buddhist claim that there is no suffering is at odds with a naturalistic framework, but *only* if we conveniently build a realist view of scientific truths into our definition of naturalism. Insofar as the primary motivation for a naturalistic approach is that science is better at predication and control than any other epistemic practices that we humans have found, just how antirealist a naturalist can be is an open question.[40] Sure, people who are the loudest about their naturalism are also often scientific realists but, if it turns out that their metaphysical commitment to realism is orthogonal to their methodological commitment to naturalism, by focusing on their metaphysics we will have missed the deeper problem.

Those who practiced this style of philosophy, so-called "Mādhyamikas," distinguished themselves by their relentless rejection of any underlying or overarching reality beyond what they would call "mere conventions."

[39] *Prajñāpāramitāhṛdaya Sūtra* (HS): *na cakṣurna śrotraṃ na ghrāṇaṃ*.

[40] As a case and point, consider Richard Rorty's naturalistic pragmatism (Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, 65).

In contrast, the problem I am pointing to is that frameworks themselves make it impossible to be free from suffering, at least according to those Buddhist views that demand we relinquish the conception of ourselves as suffering. Even if many Buddhist naturalists are also antirealist in the required way, they still run up against this insurmountable problem: if the only way to truly eliminate suffering is to undermine all frameworks that ontologize suffering, then eliminating suffering—i.e., reaching nirvāṇa—cannot be understood in naturalistic terms since the existence of suffering must be assumed within such a framework. In the simplest terms, the problem is this:

1) If there is such a thing as suffering, there is no elimination of suffering.
2) Within a naturalistic framework, there is such a thing as suffering.
Therefore,
3) Within a naturalistic framework, there is no elimination of suffering.

This is analogous to the way in which you cannot "solve" the King of France's baldness within a framework that assume his existence. Likewise, according to this particularly Madhyamaka style of soteriology, the problem of suffering cannot be "solved" within a framework that assumes there is suffering, whether that framework is the Buddhist Abhidharma or neuroscience. For as long as the elimination of suffering is viewed through an empirical lens, there is suffering and, for as long as suffering is real, it can't be gotten rid of.

Before we go any further, let me very briefly explain what a Madhyamaka denial of suffering might involve. Baldly saying that there is no suffering is going to raise eyebrows for the reader unfamiliar with Madhyamaka—"how could anyone take such an obviously false statement seriously?" This unqualified denial will be even more troubling, however, for many readers who *are* well-versed in Madhyamaka texts and styles of reasoning. Rightly, they would insist that Madhyamaka denials of eyes and ears, suffering and happiness, are a denial these things have an ultimate or objective existence independent of our concepts. Since the Mādhyamika offers no such blanket rejection of suffering, the objection continues, the way I put it above is false or, at least,

highly misleading. Instead, they insist, the problem should have been put in terms of whether suffering *ultimately* exists.

While it is true that Mādhyamikas often will nuance their denials in precisely this fashion, it is the *context* in which these denials are made that is even more to the point. When you ask Mādhyamikas to pass the salt, they are not going to quibble that there is no salt, nor, when asked by their doctor how they're feeling, are they going deny their own suffering. In this context, there is no need to stipulate that you're not asking for an ultimate, objective, sort of salt. There is another context, however, which is precisely the one that qualifiers like "ultimately" and "truly" are supposed to point us towards, where the Mādhyamika is going to reject any notion that there is salt to be passed, or suffering to be experienced. My overarching point, which I will substantiate over the course of several chapters, is that soteriology lands us firmly in the middle of this latter context.

The problem I am pointing us towards is the tension between, on the one hand, the view that, in the soteriological context in which freedom from suffering is found, any framework asserting the existence of suffering is denied, and, on the other hand, the naturalist's hope of translating soteriological concepts into psychological ones. Putting the problem in this way is important because it takes us to the heart of where the problem lies.

Sure, you could see the problem with naturalism as the tension between a) the claim that freedom from suffering requires seeing that *ultimately* there is no suffering and b) the naturalist's belief that *ultimately* there is suffering. This way of putting the problem shifts the issue to a general metaphysical disagreement that has little to do with soteriology. This way of construing the problem also falls short, however, to the extent that just how realist naturalists must be and how antirealist a Mādhyamika must be are both moving targets. I have already gestured to how naturalism might accommodate a certain antirealism, and there are plenty of moderately realist

interpretations of Madhyamaka available.[41] Who is to say that, with a little give and take from both sides, a satisfactory fusion can't be found? Or, to put it differently, their difference in metaphysics is not insurmountable in the way that, I am arguing, their differences in soteriology are. If it is indeed the case that soteriology is precisely the sort of context in which all positive assertions are discarded, naturalism falls short precisely in the context where we most wanted it to succeed.

Buddhist naturalists are obviously not required to accept such a soteriological approach—it is admittedly a bit "out there"; many Buddhist philosophers rejected it, and the Buddhist naturalist was never one to worry about breaking with tradition anyway.[42] My point, rather, is that if you attend to the soteriological disagreements between Buddhist philosophers, as we shall be doing, you will see that this question of frameworks is where we find the pivotal argument. Buddhist naturalists can argue with traditionally-minded contemporary Buddhists about karma, rebirth, and nonphysical views of mind until they are hoarse. They can even "win" all these arguments and insist that freedom from suffering is an immediate and immanent psychological transformation. *But* until they grapple with the idea that freedom is only found when all frameworks fall, they will not have met the fundamental challenge at hand.[43]

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[41] In Tibet, Je Tsongkhapa interpreted Madhyamaka in a more realist light, particularly when read through the lens of his later interpreters. Likewise, in contemporary academic interpretations of Madhyamaka, there is a thriving subdiscipline more or less devoted to the question of just how realist a Madhyamaka can be (Cowherds, *Moonshadows: Conventional Truth in Buddhist Philosophy*).

[42] This is not to suggest that this is the only difficulty facing Buddhist naturalists. Even more importantly, this is not to suggest that it will be smooth sailing for them, so long as they ignore this Madhyamaka infused Mahāyāna madness, confining themselves instead to Buddhist soteriological approaches in which frameworks are not dismantled. I shall bring out some of these difficulties over the course of the next chapter as I discuss the "unconditioned," although there are yet other difficulties also demanding further scrutiny.

[43] For this insight, I am indebted to Evan Thompson, who makes a similar point in the context of discussing the unconditioned:

> Rebirth is a red herring. The crux of the matter is the unconditioned as transcendent versus the unconditioned as a psychological state…

1.3. Texts and Methods

How are we to go about this task of philosophically reflecting on the elimination of suffering? What texts shall guide our inquiry into whether nirvāṇa ought to be understood as immanent or transcendent? Where, in what texts, do we find the idea that the problem of suffering is "solved" only upon realizing there is no suffering and abandoning any framework that says there is? Since our task is to philosophically reflect on Buddhist soteriology, our inquiry is bound up with the exegetical excavation of these ideas as we find them in *particular* texts. My overarching point in this study—what I have been discussing thus far about what it might mean to get rid of suffering—comes out more clearly when we widen our scope to see the philosophical dialectics between competing Buddhist soteriologies. And we will see this far more clearly if we do not simply focus on one text, or even one genre or time period. For this reason, I propose that we try to think with Indian and Tibetan Buddhist philosophers as they debated these questions across traditions, philosophical epochs, and cultures.

As readers who are familiar with this canonical material are well aware, however, even just focusing on Indian Mahāyāna philosophical texts, or just on Tibetan commentaries, would already be far too much material for any one study. And, yet, in light of the incredible diversity of views within Indian and Tibetan Buddhist texts on precisely these questions, where we focus and at what point we pick up the commentarial thread affects the sort of conclusions we can draw. If our task is to join these thinkers in their soteriological reflections, which conversation do we choose, and at what point do we join in?

> The question is whether there can be such a radical and liberating transformation of our being that, from the perspective of not having undergone it, it cannot but look utterly transcendent, and thus seem unconditioned by ordinary existence Thompson, *Why I Am Not a Buddhist*, 82 & 83.

See also Thompson, "Buddhist Philosophy and Scientific Naturalism," 3; Gowans, *Philosophy of the Buddha*, 53.

In what follows I focus most of all on the writings of Vasubandhu, Candrakīrti and the inexhaustible *Abhisamayālaṃkāra*, although they are just at the front of a long line of Indian Buddhist thinkers whose texts we shall be analyzing. At many critical junctures, where the Indian material is ambiguous or just silent, I turn to Tibetan commentators for perspective.

Even though I am mostly focused on these pivotal Indian Buddhist texts, to get there, to see how these texts eventually come together to form a coherent dialogue spanning millennia, we need to start at the other end of the commentarial thread with the Tibetan writers I use to augment and enrich these Indic ruminations. Throughout the following I shall be drawing on several centuries of Sakya commentarial scholarship from the 12th century Jetsun Drakpa Gyaltsan (*rje btsun grags pa rgyal mtshan*, 1147-1216) to the 15th century Gorampa Sonam Sengge (*go rams pa bsod nams seng ge* 1429–1489, a time period that arguably marks the heyday of Tibetan philosophy.[44] As we proceed, alongside these two remarkably influential scholars, I will also at times draw on the writings of their teachers, students, and rivals, most notably Sakya Pandita, Rongton Sheja Kunrik, and most of all Shākya Chokden.[45]

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[44] For a historical overview of early Sakya tradition, see Dhongthog Rinpoche, *The Sakya School of Tibetan Buddhism*; Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance*. With the exception of Sakya Pandita, all of these Sakya figures have been woefully neglected in the academic literature, Drakpa Gyaltsan, most of all. For what's available, see Davidson, 52; Vose, *Resurrecting Candrakīrti: Disputes in the Tibetan Creation of Prasāṇgika*, 57 ff.; Lindsay, "Death for a Buddhist Dreamer: Identity and Mortality in Jetsun Drakpa Gyaltsen's Autobiographical Dream Narrative"; Péter, "The Khon Clan and the Sakyapas," 178; Gold, *The Dharma's Gatekeepers: Sakya Paṇḍita on Buddhist Scholarship in Tibet*, 10. While most academic material on Gorampa has focused on his interpretation of Madhyamaka or Pramāṇa, for some more general discussions see Dreyfus, *Recognizing Reality: Dharmakīrti's Philosophy and Its Tibetan Interpretations*, 27; Jorden, "Buddha-Nature: Through the Eyes of Go Rams Pa Bsod Nams Seng Ge in Fifteenth-Century Tibet"; Kassor, "Thinking the Unthinkable / Unthinking the Thinkable: Conceptual Thought, Nonconceptuality, and Gorampa Sonam Senge's Synopsis of Madhyamaka"; Thakchoe, *The Two Truths Debate: Tsongkhapa and Gorampa on the Middle Way*; Gorampa, *Freedom from Extremes: Gorampa's "Distinguishing the Views" and the Polemics of Emptiness*.

[45] For an in-depth study of how these Indian texts were received and perceived in Tibet, particularly through the eyes of Sakya Pandita, see Gold, *The Dharma's Gatekeepers: Sakya Paṇḍita on Buddhist Scholarship in Tibet*. For general scholarship on Sakya Pandita, see Jackson, "Commentaries on the Writings of Sa-Skya Pandita"; Kuijp, *Contributions to the Development of Tibetan Buddhist Epistemology: From the Eleventh to the Thirteenth Century*; Jackson, "Two Grub Mtha' Treatises of Sa-Skya Pandita—One Lost and One Forged"; Jackson, "Sa-Skya Pandita the 'Polemicist': Ancient Debates and Modern Interpretations"; Dreyfus, *Recognizing Reality: Dharmakīrti's Philosophy and Its Tibetan Interpretations*, 23; Tsering, "Sakya Pandita : Glimpses of His Three Major Works";

My choice of Tibetan philosophers is no accident. While this line of Sakya scholarship is one possible starting point among many, these scholars were particularly relentless in their commentarial claims that reality was beyond concepts and that everything else was utterly tenuous. As will become clearer in subsequent chapters, when it comes to the interpretation of nirvāṇa, there are important differences between thinkers who are, more or less, in the same camp. Even though the versions I present were exceedingly influential, even at certain points mainstream, there were also important dissenting views. Since according to some of these dissenting views it is not even clear my overarching point about kicking away ladders and undermining soteriological frameworks makes sense, my starting point has real philosophical consequences.

Cutting the Tibetan commentarial pie along these lines is not to suggest these Sakya thinkers shared a unitary vision. By the time Rongton Sheja Kunrik (*Rong ston shes bya kun rig,* 1367-1449) had bequeathed his legacy to his two most formidable students, Gorampa and Shākya Chokden, the intellectual universe of Drakpa Gyaltsan and his nephew Sakya Pandita had been radically transformed by the ideas of Je Tsongkhapa, an extraordinarily influential and controversial 14th – 15th century luminary who also has a part to play in what follows.[46] When Drakpa Gyaltsan and Sakya Pandita were writing, Tsongkhapa's ideas were on the fringes of the

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Gold, "Sa-Skya Paṇḍita's Buddhist Argument for Linguistic Study"; Stoltz, "Sakya Pandita and the Status of Concepts"; Pascale, "Inherited Opponents and New Opponents – A Look at Informal Argumentation in the Tshad Ma Rigs Gter"; Gold, "Sakya Paṇḍita's Anti-Realism as a Return to the Mainstream"; Broido, "Sa-Skya Pandita, the White Panacea and the Hva-Shang Doctrine"; Gold, *The Dharma's Gatekeepers: Sakya Paṇḍita on Buddhist Scholarship in Tibet*.

[46] Dreyfus, *Recognizing Reality: Dharmakīrti's Philosophy and Its Tibetan Interpretations*, 27; Komarovski, *Visions of Unity The Golden Pandita Shakya Chokden's New Interpretation of Yogacara and Madhyamaka*, 20. For the limited available work on Rong ston, see Jackson, *The Early Abbots of ʾPhan-Po Na-Lendra: The Vicissitudes of a Great Tibetan Monastery in the 15th Century.2*; Arai, "Rong Ston's Critique of Tsong Kha Pa-Based on His Interpretation of the Abhisamayâlamkara"; Kuijp, "Rong-Ston on the Prajñāpāramitā Philosophy of the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra*, His Sub-Commentary on Haribhadra's *'Sphuṭārthā'*: A Facsimile Reproduction of the Earliest Known Blockprint Edition, from an Examplar Preserved in the Tibet House, New Delhi"; Van Schaik, *Tibet: A History*, 105–6; Komarovski, *Visions of Unity The Golden Pandita Shakya Chokden's New Interpretation of Yogacara and Madhyamaka*, 20. See Jingpa, for an excellent biography and overview of Tsongkhapa (*Tsongkhapa: A Buddha in the Land of Snows*).

imaginable; when Gorampa and Shākya Chokden sat down to write their own commentaries, his claims were an intellectual challenge that could not be ignored.

More importantly, the more orthodox Gorampa—lucid, simple even at his most complex, and uncompromising in his defense of the ineffable—was in fact arguing against the slightly wayward Shākya Chokden (*Shākya mchog ldan,* 1428-1507) who, over an extraordinarily long and prolific career, addressed and then readdressed so many of Buddhist philosophy's most vexing problems.[47] And, to complicate matters further, while Gorampa was overwhelmingly influenced by Drakpa Gyaltsan and Sakya Pandita, some of the time he is arguing against his own teacher, Rongton, whereas at other times he is writing in his teacher's defense, all the while taking every opportunity to criticize Tsongkhapa.[48] I bring several generations of Sakya scholars together in this way not because they had reached some sort of consensus, but rather because as they talk to each other, they produce a rich multilayered debate that adds considerable depth and nuance to how nirvāṇa is to be understood.

[47] While Gorampa held tightly to the ideas of the early Sakya patriarchs, Shākya Chokden developed his views more independently and was known, on occasion, to even criticize the unassailable Sakya Pandita (Dreyfus, *Recognizing Reality: Dharmakīrti's Philosophy and Its Tibetan Interpretations*, 28; Komarovski, *Visions of Unity The Golden Pandita Shakya Chokden's New Interpretation of Yogacara and Madhyamaka*, 3). While Shākya Chokden eventually held a sophisticated version of the "other emptiness" (*gzhan stong*) position, since the conceptual landscape we are traversing is already quite complex, I do not delve into this aspect of his thought here, illuminating though that would be. In fact, his position is far enough from the other Madhyamaka positions I do discuss that, I would not have included his perspectives at all, if it were not for the fact that, on numerous points in what follows, Shākya Chokden offers a fresh and insightful perspective, not to be found elsewhere, that turns out to be crucial for our inquiry.

For both overview and in-depth analysis of Shākya Chokden's thought, see Komarovski, *Visions of Unity The Golden Pandita Shakya Chokden's New Interpretation of Yogacara and Madhyamaka*; Komarovski, *Tibetan Buddhism and Mystical Experience*), as well as Komarovski, "Shakya Chokden's Interpretation of the 'Ratnagotravibhāga': 'Contemplative' or 'Dialectical'?"; Komarovski, "Buddhist Contributions to the Question of (Un)Mediated Mystical Experience"; Komarovski, "From the Three Natures to the Two Natures: On a Fluid Approach to the Two Versions of Other-Emptiness from Fifteenth-Century Tibet"; Dreyfus, *Recognizing Reality: Dharmakīrti's Philosophy and Its Tibetan Interpretations*, 27 ff.

[48] Jorden, "Buddha-Nature: Through the Eyes of Go Rams Pa Bsod Nams Seng Ge in Fifteenth-Century Tibet," 73.

When these Tibetan scholastics looked back on Indian Buddhism, a particular subset of Indian Buddhist texts appeared as a distinct canon, with some uncontroversially great texts (*gzhung chen mo*) overshadowing the rest. Tibetan commentators from all traditions gradually came to a consensus about the Indian authors that we need to listen to the, although this is not to suggest that this process of canon formation was always so uncontested.[49] My point, rather, is that the Tibetan figures I focus on here were generally in agreement with their contemporary opponents about which Indian figures most warranted their attention. Even though they disagreed on which texts were definitive, Gorampa and Shākya Chokden agreed with their archrival, Je Tsongkhapa, that the Indian texts that mattered most were the writings of Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti, Asanga and Vasubandhu, Dignāga and Dharmakīrti, along with the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra* and the other "texts of Maitreya."

These Indian texts are my main focus in what follows, most of all the works of Vasubandhu and Candrakīrti, along with the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra* commentarial literature. Above all else, it is to them that I ask our questions about the purpose of the Buddhist path. If we look at Vasubandhu and Candrakīrti together for a moment, their differences are illuminating: The influence of the 4th century Vasubandhu on the intellectual development of Buddhist philosophy has no rival.[50] As author of the extraordinarily influential *Abhidharmakośa* (AK) and *Bhāṣya* (AKbh), he was pivotal for Sanskritic Abhidharma scholarship; as the author of such texts as the *Viṃśikā* and *Triṃśikā*, he

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49 As Kevin Vose has shown so masterfully in the case of Candrakīrti, for instance, the rise of this Indian philosopher to stardom was the result of a complex, highly contested, historical development (Vose, *Resurrecting Candrakīrti: Disputes in the Tibetan Creation of Prasāṇgika*). No doubt similar processes were at play as other Indian thinkers rose to exert outsized influence on Tibetan thought.

50 Gold, *Paving the Great Way: Vasubandhu's Unifying Buddhist Philosophy*, 1. Unlike most of the philosophers discussed thus far, there is enormous amount of academic material available on Vasubandhu, by way of introduction, see Gold, *Paving the Great Way: Vasubandhu's Unifying Buddhist Philosophy*. Also see Gold for an introduction to the notoriously thorny issues surrounding Vasubandhu's date (12–18).

became one of the founding figures of Yogācāra philosophy.[51] Tibetans would, for good reason, come to call him the "Second Buddha" for his foundational position in both Abhidharma commentarial traditions and the emerging Yogācāra style of Mahāyāna philosophy.[52]

The Mādhyamika philosopher Candrakīrti (c.600-650) by contrast, appears to have been relatively unknown, and his influence on Indian Buddhism, to the extent that he had any, is difficult to discern and subject to debate.[53] Candrakīrti devoted particular attention to critiquing his Mādhyamika predecessor Bhāviveka as well as Abhidharma and Yogācāra, even singling Vasubandhu out along with several others for his failure to understand dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*).[54] Moreover, where Vasubandhu confronts us with a kaleidoscope of philosophical approaches, further frustrating scholarly attempts to settle questions of authorship, Candrakīrti seems to only write in one register—with but few possible exceptions, he commented

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[51] Gold, *Paving the Great Way: Vasubandhu's Unifying Buddhist Philosophy*, 22 ff.

[52] *gzhung don rab gsal*, 1: *ston pa gnyis pa*; *dka' gnas,* 1: *kun mkhyen gnyis pa*; *phar phyin spyi don*, 35: "*kun mkhyen gnyis pa*."

[53] These dates are Seyfort Ruegg's estimate, although Lang has suggested 550-650 and Kimura puts Candrakīrti twenty years after Dharmapāla whose dates, he argues, are 550-620 (Ruegg, *The Literature of the Madhyamaka School of Philosophy in India*, 71; Lang, *Four Illusions: Candrakīrti's Advice for Travelers on the Bodhisattva Path*, 7; Kimura, "A New Chronology of Dharmakīrti," 211). On Candrakīrti, see Tillemans, *Materials for the Study of Āryadeva, Dharmapāla and Candrakīrti*, 13; Lang, *Four Illusions: Candrakīrti's Advice for Travelers on the Bodhisattva Path*, 8 ff.; Kragh, *Early Buddhist Theories of Action and Result: A Study of Karmaphalasambandha Candrakīrti's Prasannapadā, Verses 17.1-20*, 21 fn.21; Vose, *Resurrecting Candrakīrti: Disputes in the Tibetan Creation of Prasāṇgika*; Lang and Eltschinger, "Candrakīrti"; Westerhoff, *Candrakīrti's Introduction to the Middle Way: A Guide*; Scherrer-Schaub, *Yuktiṣaṣṭikāvṛtti: Commentaire à La Soixantaine Sur Le Raisonnement, Ou, Du Vrai Enseignement de La Causalité*, xxxi ff. For discussions of his influence in India, see Vose, *Resurrecting Candrakīrti: Disputes in the Tibetan Creation of Prasāngika*, 27; MacDonald, *In Clear Words*, 1:4 ff. For general historical discussions of Candrakīrti, see Lindtner, "Candrakīrti's *Pañcaskandhaprakaraṇa* I. Tibetan Text"; Ruegg, *The Literature of the Madhyamaka School of Philosophy in India*, 71 ff.; Tillemans, *Materials for the Study of Āryadeva, Dharmapāla and Candrakīrti*; Lang, *Four Illusions: Candrakīrti's Advice for Travelers on the Bodhisattva Path*; Arnold, *Buddhists, Brahmins, and Belief: Epistemology in South Asian Philosophy of Religion*; Vose, *Resurrecting Candrakīrti: Disputes in the Tibetan Creation of Prasāṇgika*; Li, "Candrakīrti's Āgama: A Study of the Concept and Uses of Scripture in Classical Indian Buddhism"; MacDonald, *In Clear Words*; Westerhoff, *Candrakīrti's Introduction to the Middle Way: A Guide*.

[54] MABh(LVP), 407; Westerhoff, *Candrakīrti's Introduction to the Middle Way: A Guide*, 217. For Bhāviveka, see Ruegg, *The Literature of the Madhyamaka School of Philosophy in India*, 61–66; Eckel, *Bhāviveka and His Buddhist Opponents*; Bouthillette, "Bhāviveka: Madhyamaka Dialectic, Doxography, and Soteriology," 346.

only on the most foundational Madhyamaka texts and always in the same mocking philosophical style.[55]

Meanwhile, the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra*, another principal source for our inquiry, is a cryptic systematization of Buddhist paths through a Mahāyāna lens. The *Abhisamayālaṃkāra* is so terse and cryptic, in fact, that it enjoys a peculiarly intimate relationship with its own vast commentarial literature.[56] Not only was the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra* more commented upon than any other Indian śāstra, but it is also uniquely incomprehensible when read by itself. According to legend, Asanga, who, as the story goes, was in fact Vasubandhu's elder brother, heard the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra* from the future Buddha, Maitreya, while on a visionary journey to his heavenly paradise.[57] Significantly for the point I am about to make, it is not clear what historical importance the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra* had for Vasubandhu, not to mention Candrakīrti.[58]

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[55] There has been on going scholarly debate over whether there is a single Vasubandhu or several, at issue is whether the author of the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* (AKbh) also wrote some or all of the various Yogācāra works attributed to him (Frauwallner, *On the Date of the Buddhist Master of the Law Vasubandhu*; Cox, *Disputed Dharmas, Early Buddhist Theories on Existence: An Annotated Translation of the Section of Factors Dissociated from Thought from Saṇghabhadra's* Nyāyānusāra, 53; Jaini, "On the Theory of Two Vasubandhus"; Hirakawa, "Introduction"; Anacker, "Vasubandhu's *Karmasiddhiprakaraṇa* and the Problem of the Highest Meditations"; Mejor, *Vasubandhu's* Abhidharmakośa *and the Commentaries Preserved in the Tanjur*, 42; Skilling, "Vasubandhu and the *Vyākhyāyukti* Literature"; Kritzer, "Sautrāntika in the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*"; Kritzer, *Vasubandhu and the Yogācārabhūmi: Yogācāra Elements in the Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*; Park, *Vasubandhu, Śrīlāta, and the Sautrāntika Theory of Seeds*). Among other things, part of the debate has centered on whether we can, in fact, discern single commentarial voice across these works (Skilling, "Vasubandhu and the *Vyākhyāyukti* Literature"; Gold, *Paving the Great Way: Vasubandhu's Unifying Buddhist Philosophy*, 4). For an insightful overview of these debates and a cogent argument for a "unified" Vasubandhu, see Gold. While talking about a single Vasubandhu gives a certain narrative continuity to our discussions, whether there are one or more Vasubandhus does not affect any of my claims in what follows.

[56] Obermiller, *Analysis of the* Abhisamayālaṃkāra; Apple, "Abhisamayālaṃkāra"; Makransky, *Buddhahood Embodied: Sources of Controversy in India and Tibet*, 3 & 109 ff.

[57] Mathes, "Maitreya: The Future Buddha as an Author," 64.

[58] Makransky, *Buddhahood Embodied: Sources of Controversy in India and Tibet*, 111; Nakamura, "Traditions of the Commentaries Ascribed to Asaṅga and Vasubandhu on the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra*: Relationship with the Commentaries Ascribed to Daṃṣṭrasena on the *Prajñāpāramitā*-Liteature"; Nakamura, "Ārya-Vimuktisena's *Abhisamayālaṃkāravṛtti*: The Earliest Commentary on the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra*; A Critical Edition and a Translation of the Chapters Five to Eight with an Introduction and Critical Notes," 15 fn.3 & 23.

What brings these texts together then, despite their differences in content, influence, and origin? For all of their particular insights, valuable though they are, the real contribution of Tibetan commentators for what lies ahead is that it is through their eyes that we begin to see these otherwise historically disparate Indian texts as parts of a larger commentarial reflection on Buddhist soteriology. Remember that, in what follows, we are reflecting on the debates about the elimination of suffering as they emerged across an enormous swath of time and between two profoundly different intellectual cultures, for it is here that the "big picture" of Buddhist soteriological reflections can be seen most clearly. These Indian thinkers are indeed the main characters in this story as it emerges in hindsight, whether that is 15th century Tibetan scholars looking back on Indian Buddhism, or us looking back on the entire dialectical trajectory from Nāgārjuna to the present. Just as Shakespeare appears as a common scrivener among others when viewed through the lens of Elizabethan historiography but as the "Bard," unparalleled and unprecedented, when retrospectively viewed in the mirror of English literature, in the hindsight of Tibetan commentarial attention, Vasubandhu, Candrakīrti, and the many other Indian thinkers in this study emerge as Titans locked in mortal disputation.

The metaphor of conversation also accounts for how I read these texts. Reading Indian and Tibetan texts together as part of a single conversation does *not* mean reading the earlier material through the lens of later commentaries. To look at Candrakīrti, for instance, through the eyes of Tibetan Madhyamaka commentators is an art in itself, yielding more systematic and, in some ways, more philosophically rigorous interpretations, not to mention deep insights into the commentarial process.[59] Such an approach will not serve our purposes, however, since it replaces a conversation

[59] See, for example, Tillemans, "The 'Neither One Nor Many' Argument for Sunyata, and Its Tibetan Interpretations: Background Information and Source Materials"; Tillemans, "Metaphysics for Mādhyamikas"; Dreyfus, "Would the True Prāsaṅgika Please Stand? The Case and View of 'Ju Mi Pham"; Vose, *Resurrecting Candrakīrti: Disputes in the Tibetan Creation of Prasāṇgika*.

with a monologue, the back and forth of multiple perspectives with the single voice of a later commentator. For the bigger picture I am painting, we will need to hear the Indian and Tibetan authors talking in their own voices, agreeing, disagreeing, adapting, and riffing off of each other.

1.4. Arhats & Buddhas

Our task is to reflect on whether the "solution" to the problem of suffering is to see through the problem, undercutting the very notion that there is suffering to be eliminated. Although, up to this point, I have been loosely equating this elimination of suffering with nirvāṇa, to make sense of the disagreements and differences of opinion among Buddhist philosophers on this question, we need to understand the more nuanced conceptual landscape of Buddhist soteriological discussions. Even though, over the course of the next few chapters, we will be moving across a vast swath of material, ranging from the *Abhidharmakośa* to the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra*, our lens and master narrative will be rooted in Mahāyāna soteriological frameworks. Crucially, however, within that framework, nirvāṇa does *not* necessarily just mean the elimination of suffering—instead, nirvāṇa turns out to be a graded phenomenon with levels, distinctions, and limitations.

In Mahāyāna systematizations of Buddhist paths and goals, the yogin can follow one of two career paths: The first is to get rid of your own suffering or become an Arhat, "one who has destroyed the Enemy."[60] The enemy here, the one whose destruction is the minimal criterion for becoming an Arhat, is a mental state called "*kleśa*," a term I will leave untranslated, since its range of reference is importantly different from any native English term. Some *kleśa* are what we would call "emotions," greed and hatred, for instance, but *kleśa* also refers to states that we would call

[60] This etymological explanation of the term is reflected in the Tibetan translation "*dgra bcom pa*" (Hopkins, *The Essence of Other-Emptiness*, 28029 fn.d). For a useful discussion of the concept of Arhat, see Gowans, *Philosophy of the Buddha*, 138.

"beliefs."[61] The idea that things are permanent, for instance, is considered a particularly pernicious *kleśa,* but it lacks the affective qualities we associate with emotions. Crucially, *kleśa* are those mental events that are the immediate and necessary cause of suffering. They are also the first of the two "obscurations" (*āvaraṇa*) we saw Candrakīrti referring to earlier in the context of the "other shore."[62] When Arhats destroy the enemy, getting rid of *kleśa*, this is the elimination of suffering. This elimination of suffering is what Buddhist philosophers are most often referring to when they talk about nirvāṇa.[63]

The second career path is to become a Buddha. Someone on this path is what is famously called a "bodhisattva." To think about and aspire to be a Buddha is not to step away from the problem of suffering but to address it without qualification—the problem is no longer my suffering but simply suffering across the board—mine, yours, everyone's. Even though Mahāyāna texts will often emphasize other enticing perquisites such as a Buddha's power, the primary motivation for setting out on this far longer and more ambitious career is that only a Buddha can lead others out of suffering.[64]

The idea here is that the ability to lead another person from suffering hinges on a cognitive capacity. As an ordinary being, my capacity to help other ordinary beings is limited because I have no idea what they really need. Even if I got rid of my own *kleśa,* that wouldn't help because I would still not be fully aware of what others actually need. Asking them will not help because they

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[61] Lamotte, "Passions and Impregnations of the Passions in Buddhism"; Miyazaki, "Defilement (*Kleśa*) Originating from Erroneous Judgment (*Ayoniśomanasikāra*) According to the Mahāyāna Sūtras"; Dreyfus, "Is Compassion an Emotion?," 41.

[62] MABh(X), 24.

[63] Whether "nirvāṇa" in this context refers particularly to the elimination of *kleśa*, the cause, or to the elimination of suffering, the effect, gets hammered out in scholastic discussions of *sopadhiśeṣa* and *nirupadhiśeṣa nirvāṇa*, our focus in Chapter 4.

[64] AAsa, 10.

are profoundly deluded about their own needs; nor can I find the answer in a book, since what they need is entirely specific to them at a particular point in time within their particular perspective. The only way to help them is to attain the superhuman cognitive capacity Buddhists call "omniscience" (*sarvajña*).[65] In other words, one must become a Buddha, "one who is Awakened." Since simply eliminating *kleśa* doesn't get you there, Buddhist philosophers identify some other, much debated, factor that must be eliminated in order to be a Buddha—these factors are the "cognitive obscurations" (*jñeyāvaraṇa*) Candrakīrti was referring to earlier.[66]

The thing about Buddhas, however, is that to fulfill their purpose they have to go around leading people from suffering—that was, after, the whole point of attaining this cognitive capacity. Hence, the concept of an Arhat would still make perfect sense even if we thought it occurred in some other ethereal plane, but the concept of Buddha only makes sense if, upon attaining this state, one has some heightened connection to and participation with embodied existence in saṃsāra. Within a Buddhist soteriological framework this creates something of a puzzle: Buddhas cannot actually be in saṃsāra in the same embodied sense that we are, since then they'd be similarly stuck; but nor can they disappear into a disembodied sort of nirvāṇa.[67] The Mahāyāna answer to this dilemma is to say that the Buddha is located neither in saṃsāra nor nirvāṇa but, rather, has attained a "non-located nirvana" (*apratiṣṭhita-nirvāṇa*). This is second and most exalted sense of the term "nirvāṇa" as we find it Mahāyāna texts.[68]

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[65] RVṬ, 80. Griffiths, "Omniscience in the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṅkāra* and Its Commentaries"; McClintock, *Omniscience and the Rhetoric of Reason: Śāntarakṣita and Kamalaśīla on Rationality, Argumentation, and Religious Authority.2*, 34.

[66] MABh(X), 24.

[67] Makransky, *Buddhahood Embodied: Sources of Controversy in India and Tibet*, 85.

[68] See, for instance, MSABh, 124.

Now, having made this distinction between nirvāṇa as the elimination of one's own suffering and the non-abiding nirvāṇa of the Buddha, we are in a better position to consider the idea that the elimination of suffering is about letting frameworks go. Does this mean that to get rid of suffering we must see that there is no suffering, or must we see through all frameworks and concepts? Returning again to the question of how to cure the present king of France's baldness, one possibility is that to "solve" this question we must let go of the idea that there is such a person; another claim, not justified in this context, is that we must let go of all ideas, not just that there is a reigning French monarch but also, for instance, the idea that there isn't. What are the Mahāyāna soteriological strategies that I am suggesting? Is it that, to get rid of my suffering, I have to let go of the idea of suffering, or that I have to let go of all ideas?

As it turns out, this question was at the heart of a soteriological debate that raged through Indian and Tibetan Madhyamaka literature.[69] One idea on the table was that eliminating my suffering doesn't require either letting go of the idea of suffering or of frameworks more generally; instead, realizing Selflessness was sufficient.[70] Another influential approach, however, that would eventually be adopted by many of the Sakya commentators I have mentioned, most notably Gorampa, is that to get rid of my suffering I must let go of any concept that I actually have suffering to get rid of, but I need not transcend frameworks altogether. In order to become a Buddha, however, I must go beyond even that, letting go of any framework whatsoever.[71] The affirmation

[69] PrPr, F.183b; PsP, 351; MABh(X); 14; *ngan sel*, 302 ff. See also Siderits, "On the Soteriological Significance of Emptiness"; Westerhoff, *Candrakīrti's Introduction to the Middle Way: A Guide*, 33.

[70] Candrakīrti attributes this view to Bhāviveka (PrPr, F.183b; PsP, 351).

[71] *lta ba'i shan 'byed*, 74 & 77. Specifically, Gorampa claims that *Śrāvaka* practitioners, on their way to becoming Arhats, must eliminate grasping onto the aggregates as real (*bden par 'dzin pa*) (*lta ba'i shan 'byed*, 77). For Gorampa, you get rid of grasping at the true existence of the aggregates by negating their existence (in contrast to the position of his rival, Tsongkhapa, who argued that negating the true existence (*bden par grup pa*) of the aggregates does not negate their existence (*yod pa*)). Since, as we shall see, the aggregates *are* the suffering in question, to negate (*bkag*) them is to realize that there is no suffering.

that I suffer, or its denial, or both, or neither undergirds my cognitive inability to reach beyond myself. Understood in this way, the insistence that I am suffering is what we were calling a "*kleśa* obscuration" (*kleśāvaraṇa*), insofar as it keeps me bound to saṃsāra, whereas frameworks more generally are "cognitive obscurations" (*jñeyāvaraṇa*), since they are that extra something that keeps even Arhats from the inconceivable cognitive magnificence of the Buddha.

2. Chapter Summary

I have already hinted that we will have profoundly missed the point if we try to tackle Buddhist soteriological questions without asking this more basic question of whether we are to get rid of suffering at all. Over the course of the next four chapters I will show the sort of challenge this question poses for how we think about Buddhist soteriology—a challenge that was keenly felt by premodern Buddhist philosophers and, I argue, a challenge that we contemporary interpreters should also wise up to.

We will begin by taking it as obvious that we do suffer, that this can be remedied, and that the whole point of the Buddhist path is to do just that. From there I will show how tensions internal to the soteriological logic of the Buddhist path push us towards the seemingly bizarre non-solution of denying that there was even a problem in the first place.

To this end, in the next chapter, our focus will be on the question of whether someone who has attained nirvāṇa continues after death—one of the canonically enshrined "unanswered questions" the Buddha refused to answer. Although we will start with the classical view that the reason this question was left unanswered is that it presupposes a Self that might or might not survive postmortem, I will point us towards a deeper ambiguity here—Self or no Self, just how are we to understand the elimination of suffering? Is there something which is nirvāṇa, even if it can't be

fully articulated from where we stand? Or are we to understand nirvāṇa as simply an absence of *kleśa* and suffering, stripped of any ontology?

What I am going to show is that these options put us in a bind. So much so, I suggest, that we might want to reconsider our initial premise that there is suffering to be eliminated. If we opt for the positive metaphysical way of thinking about the elimination of suffering, according to which there is something which is nirvāṇa, that something would appear to be conditioned or affected by what we do. Since the Buddhist intuition motivating these soteriological inquiries is that freedom from suffering must be *unconditioned*, we find ourselves with a puzzle, if not a paradox. How can the unconditioned nirvāṇa be affected or produced by the path?

Then again, we fair no better when we eschew this positive metaphysics in favor of the idea that nirvāṇa is just the absence of any future suffering. The trouble here is that, if nirvāṇa is a purely negative achievement, a disappearing act if you will, it seems that, in the process of getting rid of suffering we also got rid of everything else, like getting rid of a toothache with a guillotine. By reflecting on these tensions I am hoping to foster a discomfort with our starting point—if we start from the idea that we are, indeed, suffering, we are stuck in the question of what constitutes the elimination of suffering.

What if, instead, the point is to realize that there never was any suffering and, therefore, that there is no elimination of suffering to get tangled up over? In Chapter Three, I use Candrakīrti's Madhyamaka lens to consider how this might make sense. I shall go about this in two steps: First I offer a fairly extensive introduction to Candrakīrti's philosophy, for nothing he says about nirvāṇa will make sense until we have considered what he means by a "*svabhāv*a" or essence, why there is no such thing, and where that leaves our ordinary concepts.

With that philosophical preliminary behind us, I spend the rest of the chapter reflecting on what it means to say that emptiness is nirvāṇa. What I will show is that, for these Mādhyamikas, the ontological fact that, upon analysis, or in "reality," there are no aggregates and no suffering is precisely the freedom from suffering we call "nirvāṇa." What this means is that suffering is not eliminated because, in the emptiness that we are now calling "nirvāṇa," there is no suffering nor for that matter, anything else.

The upshot of this is that the problem of eliminating suffering turns out, at least in Candrakīrti's analysis, to be akin to the present king of France's baldness—it is "solved" by realizing that there is no suffering. We see this particularly clearly when we turn to revisit the unanswered questions of the previous chapter. We shall find that questions about nirvāṇa are unanswerable because, at the level of analysis where freedom from suffering becomes possible, there is no thing which is or is not the cessation of suffering.

At this point, having grasped the logic of why the "solution" to the problem of suffering might be found in the insight that there is no suffering, we will be ready to consider just what constitutes this freedom from suffering. Is it to be gained here and now or does it require leaving this body and life behind?

In Chapter Four, we reconsider what it means to be free from suffering by asking, first, what it is that we are supposed to be free from and, second, what constitutes this "freedom from" or transcendence of suffering. What we will find is that, although freedom from suffering is unequivocally and emphatically a freedom from conditioning, a transcendence of our aggregated embodied existence, what constitutes this "freedom from" or transcendence of conditioning takes us to the heart of the issue we were working through in the first few chapters—Is this "freedom

from" a matter of separating ourselves from our aggregates or is the point here that there are no aggregates and, therefore, that freedom is gained simply by seeing that there is no suffering?

When we ask these questions of Madhyamaka texts, we find that being free from conditioned aggregates is constituted by an epistemic shift that it is a matter of seeing that there are no such aggregates. In a Mahāyāna soteriological context in which, at the end of the day, we don't want freedom from suffering to require leaving everything behind—all beings we were supposed to save included—this much is good news. We don't have to go anywhere or get rid of anything to be free from conditioning, we simply need to change our perspective.

Seeing the difference between saṃsāra and nirvāṇa as a change in perspective, however, lands us in what is arguably Mahāyāna's thorniest puzzle: in the perspective in which we are free from suffering there are no beings to save, and, in the perspective in which there are, we are still conditioned and, it would seem, stuck in saṃsāra. We were told that the plan was for us to end up located neither in saṃsāra nor nirvāṇa but, it would seem that, instead, we are just bouncing erratically between the two in such a way that, from the only perspective in which there are other people we might hope to have loved and helped, we remain as miserable and incapable as always.

In Chapter Five, we will examine how this problem comes from our deeply entrenched assumption that the Buddha's return to the world is a return to the same old familiar world of saṃsāra. As it turns out, there is a great deal at stake here insofar as it is only with this premise in place that attempts to remake Buddhist soteriology in our contemporary image make sense. In order to rethink this immanent assumption, we will explore two intimately connected questions: First, normatively speaking, why were Mahāyāna thinkers so intent to show that nirvāṇa was not separate from saṃsāra? And, second, what did they mean? What philosophical sense is there to be found in this conflation of where we are going with where we are coming from? What we will find

is that, despite contemporary tendencies to the contrary, imagining this claim as an immanent affirmation of where we are is exegetically out of place and philosophically misguided. Instead, we shall see that the inseparability of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa reveals how arriving at the other shore of awakening involves an epistemic shift so total that, looking back, this shore of saṃsāra is changed beyond recognition. Now, with this rough map of the trail ahead in the back of your mind, let us start at the beginning, with the Buddha's reticence to answer our soteriological questions.

II. Unconditioned

When the wandering philosopher Vatsagotra plies the Buddha with metaphysical questions, the most famous of which is the question of what happens to the Tathāgata after death, the Buddha refuses to answer. Why the Buddha remained silent has, perhaps ironically, been a source of continuous and sustained commentarial speculation.[1] Was it for pragmatic reasons, that such questions are uselessly conjectural distractions from the path? Or, as many Buddhist philosophers have argued, was it because Vatsagotra's assumptions were such that affirming or denying the Tathāgata's continuity were equally misleading? On the most influential version of this, which we shall encounter shortly in the writings of Vasubandhu, the question is unanswerable because Vatsagotra implicitly assumed there was a Self that might or might not survive after attaining final nirvāṇa. So construed, affirming and denying that the Tathāgata continues after death both imply that there is such a Self, much like the question of whether you've stopped beating your father.

When we reflect more closely on Vatsagotra's question, however, we find that the problem runs deeper.[2] The philosophical worry prompting his question is about the elimination of suffering: is the so-called "nirvāṇa" that everyone is so excited about a 'going out,' like a flame extinguished, in which case the Tathāgata ceases at death; or is nirvāṇa an ontologically substantive thing that continues postmortem? Insofar as you, me, and Vatsagotra think that we're going to solve the

[1] In its canonical context, the Buddha's "silence" was not a refusal to respond but, rather, a refusal to answer, 'yes' or 'no,' for it is in this sense that these were "undetermined topics" (*avyākṛta vastūni*) (Organ, "The Silence of the Buddha," 127; Robinson, "Some Methodological Approaches to the Unexplained Points," 310).

[2] Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities: Utopias of the Pali Imaginaire*, 97.

problem of suffering by getting rid of it, these are our options—since we started out suffering and then, at a certain point, got rid of it, that elimination of suffering must either be the negation that it sounds like, or we can imagine that it has some sort of underlying substantive metaphysics.

Following the difficulties that come out of this dilemma between positive and negative conceptions of nirvāṇa will lead us to ask how we got to the point where these were our only choices. As I explained in the Introduction, our overarching concern is with the philosophical tension around the question of whether the "solution" to the problem of suffering is to reject the idea that there is suffering in the first place. While Buddhist philosophical texts overflow with metaphysical and epistemological arguments for why neither suffering nor any of the aggregates are real, rather than rehash those arguments here, I want us to see how, internal to the question of what it means to get rid of suffering, there might already be reasons for doubting our starting point.

To see why we might want to take such an admittedly extreme step, in this chapter, our objective is to get a glimpse of why, soteriologically speaking, there might be something wrong with the premise that suffering is to be eliminated. In a nutshell, the reason there might be something amiss is that, having had suffering, we are left with its absence which, in turn, must either be something metaphysically substantive or a mere negation. What we are going to see is that, since both options create trouble for Buddhist philosophers, there is reason to reconsider whether the goal is the elimination of suffering.

The trouble for any kind of metaphysically positive view of nirvāṇa comes from the parallel claim that freedom from suffering is unconditioned (*asaṃskṛta*). We will get to why Buddhist philosophers of all stripes insisted that the elimination of suffering was unconditioned but, for the moment, take it as axiomatic. Indeed, this would seem to be the one of the few things that Sarvāstivādin, Sautrāntika, and every other Buddhist philosopher seems to have been able to agree

on.[3] As soon we think that freedom from suffering must be unconditioned, the problem becomes this: if suffering is to be gotten rid of, then right now we have it but later, hopefully, we won't. So construed, nirvāṇa is the product of changing our situation or, in other words, is conditioned! This tension has come to be called the "paradox of liberation."[4] The upshot of this is that, as long as we persist with this idea that nirvāṇa has its own ontology, is a "something" in some sense, the very desire to go beyond conditioning—to attain the unconditioned—pulls us to reconsider our assumption that our present state of suffering is to be changed or eliminated.

Sticking with assumption that the elimination of suffering is the goal, however, the other way out of this dilemma is to reduce nirvāṇa to a purely nominal negation—soteriological irrealism if you will. In other words, there is no such thing as nirvāṇa *per se*, it is simply a concept we use to refer to the absence of future suffering or *kleśa*. While grabbing this horn of the dilemma takes some of the brunt out of the paradox, insofar as nirvāṇa is not a thing such that it might be conditioned, it is difficult to distinguish this from the "annihilationism" (*ucchedavāda*) that has always been the boogeyman of Buddhist philosophical reflection.[5]

We will begin our inquiry with Vasubandhu's extraordinarily influential *Abhidharmakośa*, an encyclopedic compendium of Abhidharma scholarship presented through the lens of the Sarvāstivāda exegetical tradition.[6] As Vasubandhu tells us, the Sarvāstivāda, literally 'those who

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[3] Cousins, "Nibbana and Abhidhamma," 107; Makransky, *Buddhahood Embodied: Sources of Controversy in India and Tibet*, 85. That said, Avalokitavrata references a fellow Buddhist (*rang gi sde pa*) who asserts a conditioned nirvāṇa (PrPrṬ, 1531).

[4] Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities: Utopias of the Pali Imaginaire*, 185; Ziporyn, *Emptiness and Omnipresence: An Essential Introduction to Tiantai Buddhism*; Sharf, "Chan Cases"; Thompson, *Why I Am Not a Buddhist*, 80.

[5] MN *i*, 140; Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, 78; Sharf, "Is Nirvāṇa the Same as Insentience?: Chinese Struggles with an Indian Buddhist Ideal," 145; Sharf, "Chan Cases," 85.

[6] Cox, *Disputed Dharmas, Early Buddhist Theories on Existence: An Annotated Translation of the Section of Factors Dissociated from Thought from Saṅghabhadra's* Nyāyānusāra, 55; Willemen, Dessein, and Cox, *Sarvāstivāda Buddhist Scholasticism*; Mejor, *Vasubandhu's* Abhidharmakośa *and the Commentaries Preserved in*

assert the existence of everything,' are so-called because of their distinctive and controversial claim that the past, present, and future exist, in contrast to the rival view that only the present exists.[7] As it turns out, however, Vasubandhu also wrote a commentary or *bhāṣya* on the *kośa* from the rival Sautrāntika philosophical position, thereby giving us a far more complex picture of the Abhidharma.[8] Although the differences between Sarvāstivāda and Sautrāntika takes on the Abhidharma aren't going to matter for the moment, we will get into at least one point of their disagreement when we turn to put a finer point on the metaphysics of nirvāṇa.

1. Unanswered Questions & King Milinda's Mango

"What happens to the Tathāgata after death?" was not the only question that went unanswered—Vatsagotra asked a total of fourteen questions, or on some counts ten, that would take on a canonical life of their own, reoccurring in increasingly distant contexts and, as we shall see in the next chapter, often imbued with even more apophatic resonances.[9] In some contexts, the Buddha's refusal to answer seems motivated by pragmatic concerns—he employs the famous parable of the arrow, for instance, to explain why we ought not to bother with such speculation. Demanding an answer to these questions is like someone shot with a poison arrow insisting that, before it can be

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the Tanjur; Mejor, "Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośa* in Non-Buddhist Philosophical Treatises"; Gold, *Paving the Great Way: Vasubandhu's Unifying Buddhist Philosophy*, 22.

[7] AK, 5.25. Banerjee, *Sarvāstivāda Literature*, 7–9; Willemen, Dessein, and Cox, *Sarvāstivāda Buddhist Scholasticism*, 19; Siderits, *Buddhism as Philosophy*, 116 fn.6.

[8] Kritzer, "Sautrāntika in the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*"; Cox, *Disputed Dharmas, Early Buddhist Theories on Existence: An Annotated Translation of the Section of Factors Dissociated from Thought from Saṇghabhadra's* Nyāyānusāra, 55.

[9] MN *ii*, 484. Even though it is the *Brahmamajāla Sūtra*'s account of the sixty-two unanswered questions found in the Tibetan Kangyur that is the focus of extended Tibetan commentary (*gter gyi kha 'byed*, 238; *gser phreng*, 774), the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* (F.236b) and other *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras* use the rubric of fourteen unanswered questions which is, in turn, reflected in MMK 25.22 and the PsP (537). For discussions of the list of ten versus fourteen, see Robinson, "Some Methodological Approaches to the Unexplained Points," 315; Rigopoulos, "The Avyākatāni and the Catuṣkoṭi Form in the Pāli Sutta Piṭaka, 1," 245; Nicholson, "The Unanswered Questions and the Limits of Knowledge," 533 fn.1.

removed, he must know the height and complexion of his assailant, the type of bowstring used, with what feathers it was fletched, and so on. The point being that he will have died before he finds answers to his questions.[10]

As pressing as these practical concerns are, it would seem there was also a philosophical rationale for the Buddha's refusal to answer.[11] According to the way Vasubandhu understands these questions in his *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, the Buddha didn't answer because the questioner is assuming there is a real Self.[12] Vasubandhu makes his case in the context of thinking about why the Buddha refused to answer another of the unanswered questions: "Are the life-force (*jīva*) and body (*śarīra*) the same or different?":

> [The questioner] asked with reference to a single life-substance (*jīva-dravya*) that is the inner active person. And that does not exist in any respect, so how is its difference or non-difference to be declared? It is like [speaking of] the hardness or softness of the tips of the tortoise's hairs.[13]

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[10] While most contemporary discussions of this parable go back to the *Cuḷamālunkya* Sutta, it enters the Tibetan canon through the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*, which in turn, was translated from the Chinese (MN *i*, 429; MP(D), F.241b); Habata, *A Critical Edition of the Tibetan Translation of the Mahāparinirvāṇa-Mahāsūtra*, v fn.4; Baums, "Hiromi Habata, Die Zentralasiatischen Sanskrit-Fragmente Des Mahāparinirvāṇa-Mahāsūtra," 71). (Note that the Tibetan Kangyur contains several nearly homonymous variations of this Sūtra, for our purposes to be distinguished by their Tohoku number (Toh 119-121)). For useful reflections on the parable of the arrow see Gowans, *Philosophy of the Buddha*, 30; Ziporyn, *Emptiness and Omnipresence: An Essential Introduction to Tiantai Buddhism*, 24 ff.; Sharf, "Chan Cases," 86.

[11] Despite considerable scholarly debate over whether the Buddha's refusal to answer was pragmatic or philosophical, the general consensus is that it was the latter (Murti, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism: A Study of the Mādhyamika System*, 36 ff.; Robinson, "Some Methodological Approaches to the Unexplained Points," 322; Kalupahana, *Causality—the Central Philosophy of Buddhism*, 179; Collins, *Selfless Persons: Imagery and Thought in Theravāda Buddhism*, 136; Hayes, "Nāgārjuna's Appeal," 343; Gowans, *Philosophy of the Buddha*, 153; Walser, *Nāgārjuna in Context: Mahāyāna Buddhism and Early Indian Culture*, 205; Nicholson, "The Unanswered Questions and the Limits of Knowledge," 535).

[12] Nāgārjuna also opts for the "philosophical" interpretation insofar as he takes the Buddha's refusal to answer as evidence of the Buddha's omniscient knowledge of the questioner's intentions and capacity (RV 1.73; RVṬ, 79).

[13] AKbh, 469: *sa hi jīvadravyam ekam antarvyāpārapuruṣam adhikṛtya pṛṣṭavān / sa ca kasmiścin nāstīti katham asyānyatvam ananyatvaṃ vā vyākriyatām / kaurmasyeva romṇo 'ntaḥkharatā mṛdutā vā.* Translation by Kapstein, *Reason's Traces: Identity and Interpretation in Indian and Tibetan Buddhist Thought*, 363. For an alternative translation and commentary, see Duerlinger, *Indian Buddhist Theories of Persons: Vasubandhu's "Refutation of the Theory of a Self,"* 89 & 223.

Vasubandhu's point here is that the question cannot be answered because the person asking has assumed there is a unitary Self, here referred to as a "life-substance" (*jīva-dravya*) or soul, which might be the same or different from the body. Since there is no such Self, it can't be either the same or different, just as tortoise hairs can be neither hard nor soft.

By way of explanation, Vasubandhu take us back to a particularly lively passage of the famous dialogue between the King Milinda and the wise Nāgasena.[14] The King, approaching Nāgasena says:

> "I ask you, sir: mendicants are talkative, so if I ask you something, please declare an answer to it!"
> "Ask away," he said and was asked,
> "Is the life the body, or is life one thing and body another?"
> "This is undeclared," said the elder.
> He said, "But, sir, I had you previously make a promise not to declare otherwise! Why have you said, on the contrary, 'This is undeclared?'"
> The elder spoke: "I too might ask you, Great King: kings are talkative, so if I ask you something, please declare an answer to it."
> "Ask away," he said and was asked,
> "About that mango tree that is in your residential quarters, are its fruits sour, or are they sweet?"
> "There is no mango tree in my residential quarters," he said.
> "But, Great King, I had you previously make a promise not to declare otherwise. Why then have you said, on the contrary, 'There is no mango?'"
> He said, "How am I to declare the sourness or sweetness of the fruits of a nonexistent tree?"
> "Just so, Great King, that life does not exist. How am I to declare its difference or non-difference from the body?[15]

[14] Kachru, "The Milindapañha: How to Use a Philosophical Resource and Find a Literary Gem"; Salomon, *The Buddhist Literature of Ancient Gandhāra: An Introduction with Selected Translations*, 25.

[15] AKbh, 469: *pṛccheyam ahaṃ bhadantam bahuvollakāśca śravaṇā bhavanti / yadi yad eva pṛccheyaṃ tad eva vyākuryā iti / pṛcchetyuktaḥ pṛṣṭavān / kiṃ nu sa jīvastaccharīramanyo jīvo 'nyaccharīramiti / avyākṛtam etad ityavocat sthaviraḥ / sa āha / nanu bhadantaḥ pūrvam eva pratijñāṃ kārito nā 'nyadvacyākartavyam iti / kim idam anyad evoktam avyākṛtam etaditi sthavira āha / aham api mahārājaṃ pṛccheyaṃ bahuvollakāśca rājāno bhavanti / yadi yad eva pṛccheyaṃ tadeva vyākuryā iti / pṛcchetyuktaḥ pṛṣṭavān / yaste 'ntaḥpure ābhravṛkṣastasya kim amlāni phalāni āhosvit madhurāṇīti / naiva mamāntaḥpure kaścidābhravṛkṣo 'stītyāha / nanu mayā pūrvameva mahārājaḥ pratijñāṃ kārito nānyadvacyākartavyam iti / kim idam anyad evoktamābhra eva nāstīti / sa āha kathamasato vṛkṣasya phalānāmamlatāṃ madhuratāṃ vā vyākaromīti / evam eva mahārāja sa eva jīvo nāsti kuto 'sya śarīrādanyatāmananyatāṃ vā vyākaromīti*. Translation by Kapstein, *Reason's Traces: Identity and Interpretation in Indian and Tibetan Buddhist Thought*, 363.

If we take this dialogue as pointing to the same problem or "knot" (*grantha*) as the unanswered questions, it becomes clear that the reason these questions were left unanswered is that the only sort of "answer" is to reject the premise.[16]

Now that we that we have clarified why these questions cannot be answered, it is time to replace one king's baldness with another king's mangos. Although I have used the more familiar case of the present King of France's baldness for pedagogical purposes, in Anglo-American philosophy, this example is meant to point to the problem of denoting non-existent things.[17] This too is a topic about which Buddhist philosophers had a great deal to say, but it is not the same problem.[18] The most obvious version of the denotation problem, in the context of Buddhist logic, is the claim that an Autonomous Self is not real—a statement which is true even though such an unreal thing cannot, strictly speaking, bear the predicate of not being real. In contrast, the difficulty with Nāgasena's question about King Milinda's mangos is that the only adequate response is to reject the premise—which, you will note, is precisely what the king does.

This is not to suggest that the problem with these questions is purely a matter of how they are formulated, however. The poor phrasing reflects poor assumptions. Returning to the question of whether the soul is the same as or different from the body, if the interlocuter had been open to questioning the soul's existence, we can imagine that he would have started with that. Instead, the questioner puts his query in this form precisely because he doesn't even consider the possibility that there is no such thing. The takeaway for us is that, when you start to think like a Buddhist

[16] AKbh, 469.

[17] Russell, "On Denoting," 479.

[18] Iwata, "On the Interpretations of the Subject (*Dharmin*) of the Inference Negating Invariable Entities in Dharmakīrtian Logic," 160.

philosopher, the best "solution" is often not a solution at all but, rather, a reconsideration of your starting point.

2. Conditioning & the Unconditioned

Now let us turn to consider whether Vatsagotra may also be struggling with something more than just his assumption of personal identity. When Vatsagotra asks the Buddha what happens to someone who has attained nirvāṇa after death, the real question is whether the elimination of suffering, this so-called nirvāṇa, is just a negation or whether there is something to it, something that might continue after death. What we are eventually going to see is that, so long as there is suffering to be eliminated, Self or no Self, we are still stuck in Vatsagotra's question. We have just seen that the way out of such questions is to reject their premises but, what we are going to find is that, to "solve" Vatsagotra's problem, we will need to let go of more than just our assumption of personal identity.

To see why this is the case, we will need to dive as deeply as we can into the notion that, above all else, freedom from suffering is unconditioned, that nirvāṇa is neither created nor affected by causes and conditions. Reflecting on the unconditioned is what will lead us to the point where we will want to ask whether it is wise to think that the elimination of suffering is the goal. To get there, however, we will have to follow the logic of the unconditioned as far as it takes us.

As soon as we say "nirvāṇa is unconditioned," aren't we back to speculative metaphysics? Maybe the unanswered questions are better understood as logical fallacies, but surely there is still some truth to the Buddha's arrow analogy? Metaphysical questions about the nature of nirvāṇa

are, indeed, profoundly thorny at best, impossible or even spuriously speculative at worst.[19] In the AKbh, after an interlocutor points out the circularity in his attempts to define nirvāṇa, Vasubandhu concedes that even though nirvāṇa is personally experienced (*pratyātmavedya*) by Āryas alone, at a minimum, we can say that it is some *thing* (*dravya*) which is good (*kuśala*) and permanent (*nitya*).[20] Then, as if to emphasize the possibility that the rest of us, who aren't so wise, might not have a clue, Vasubandhu offers the alternative point of view that, since nirvāṇa is unconditioned (*asaṃskṛta*), it cannot be a thing (*dravya*) after all.[21] If medieval Buddhist philosophers were cautious about reason's reach into nirvāṇa, what about us, disenchanted as we are with *a priori* speculative metaphysics in general, not to mention something so epistemically remote? How are we to begin?

2.1. Naturalizing the Unconditioned

There is a lot riding on this notion that nirvāṇa is unconditioned so, before we philosophically straitjacket ourselves to this idea, before our Abhidharma reflections take us to the point of no return, let us consider whether a conditioned, causally explicable nirvāṇa might not offer a better alternative. This is where Buddhist naturalism comes in. Instead of seeing nirvāṇa as unconditioned in any strong metaphysical sense, for Buddhist naturalists, nirvāṇa, or its near approximation, is a psychological accomplishment or life-skill. As our insight and practice

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[19] By calling these questions "metaphysical" I am understanding them through a contemporary lens; it remains to be seen whether anything approaching this distinction is to be found in Buddhist texts (Robinson, "Some Methodological Approaches to the Unexplained Points," 311; Hayes, "Nāgārjuna's Appeal," 344).

[20] AKbh, 92.

[21] AKbh, 92. Vasubandhu attributes this view to the Sautrāntika, a Buddhist "school" about which I will have more to say later in this chapter. See also Kritzer ("Sautrāntika in the Abhidharmakośabhāṣya," 339).

See Gowans for a discussion of canonical claims that nirvāṇa cannot be understood by ordinary means (*Philosophy of the Buddha*, 137).

deepens, we gain the ability to not get caught in, or conditioned by, our thoughts, paranoias, and emotional hang-ups. As a description of *a* goal of Buddhist practice, the notion that we will become less conditioned by psychological ailments *x*, *y*, and *z* seems plausible.

What we need to ask, however, is why Buddhist naturalist think this psychologized nirvāṇa must replace the Abhidharma's metaphysical account of the unconditioned. For starters, unconditioned entities are to be avoided for the same reason that the Self is to be rejected. Buddhist naturalists believe that there is a rapprochement between Buddhist ideas of selflessness and the ontology of hard science, insofar as they both are antithetical to Cartesian souls and the Upanaṣidic *ātman*.[22] Good naturalists believe in the causal closure of the physical world and, therefore, that there is nothing outside of the causal world. Everything else, from Platonic ideas to *ātman*, are nothing more than the abstractions of idle philosophers and confused mystics. Since, on their interpretation, the Buddha's objection to the *ātman* was driven by his critique of any uncaused thing, accepting an unconditioned *nirvāṇa*, they argue, is a relapse into precisely the sort of "absolutism" that the Buddha was speaking against.[23]

It is for this reason that Buddhist naturalists interpret the Buddha's talk about the unconditioned psychologically, in the sense of not being conditioned by reactive patterns and impulses.[24] This is why they insist that when the Buddha spoke of nirvāṇa as "unconditioned," he did not mean that there was some *thing* not conditioned by causes and conditions. Batchelor writes:

> Gotama takes a noun, "the unconditioned," and treats it as a verb: "not to be conditioned" by something. He seems acutely aware of the relational nature of language. There is no such thing, for example, as freedom per se. There is only freedom from constraints, or freedom to act in ways that were not possible because

[22] Ganeri, *The Self: Naturalism, Consciousness, and the First-Person Stance*, 218; Westerhoff, "Buddhism without Reincarnation? Examining the Prospects of a 'Naturalized' Buddhism," 146.

[23] Batchelor, *After Buddhism: Rethinking the Dharma for a Secular Age*, 133.

[24] Batchelor, 306; Flanagan, *The Bodhisattva's Brain: Buddhism Naturalized*, 22; Wright, *Why Buddhism Is True: The Science and Philosophy of Meditation and Enlightenment*, 220 ff.

> of those constraints. Nor is there any awakening per se, but only awakening from the "sleep" of delusion, or awakening to the presence of others who suffer. And there is no such thing as the unconditioned, only the possibility of not being conditioned by something.[25]

To be unconditioned in the good sense that the Buddha intended means to not be adversely affected by *kleśa*; it does not mean transcending causality.

It is worth briefly digressing at this point to ask why Indian and Tibetan Buddhist philosophers did not perceive the same inevitably slippery slope from accepting the unconditioned to accepting an *ātman*. Without getting into all the complexity this question invites, in short, for many Buddhist philosophers, their rejection of an *ātman* was motivated by mereological arguments, not by any general objection to unconditioned entities. Indeed, as I mentioned above, alongside nirvāṇa, many Abhidharma thinkers held that space and so-called non-analytic cessations (*apratisaṃkhyānirodha*) were also uncaused.[26] Insofar as causality factored into their notions of selfless at all, their objection was to the incompatibility between an uncaused Self and causality required to be an agent performing actions, not the belief that everything was caused.[27] For other Buddhist philosophers, however, like Dharmakīrti and the ever-difficult to identify Sautrāntikas, even though there was indeed a problem with positing the existence of an uncaused thing (*bhāva*), since *nirvāṇa* was not a thing, there was no slippery slope from accepting an unconditioned nirvāṇa to accepting a real *ātman*.[28]

Turning back to naturalism, the upshot of all of this is that, from that perspective, nirvāṇa is conditioned and impermanent. Although, metaphysically speaking, it is conceivable that nirvāṇa

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[25] Batchelor, *After Buddhism: Rethinking the Dharma for a Secular Age*, 145.

[26] AK 1.5; SA, 251.

[27] Duerlinger, *Indian Buddhist Theories of Persons: Vasubandhu's "Refutation of the Theory of a Self,"* 290.

[28] Dunne, *Foundations of Dharmakīrti's Philosophy*, 78.

is a conditioned yet stable and lasting state, for a naturalist, that would be to replace a metaphysically suspect entity with an even more outrageous supernatural entity, causally interacting with the world without itself having any empirical validity. Buddhist naturalists replace traditional aspirations for a lasting state with something far more achievable—moments, and, as we practice, longer and deeper moments—of not being conditioned by our reactive mental habits. As such, the goal of Buddhist practice would seem to be profoundly in keeping with the Buddha's overall message—at the end of the day, what we get from Buddhist practice is also ephemeral, changing, and subject to all the conditioning of the natural world.

For the Buddhist naturalists, this is all it means when to say that the cessation of *kleśa* is unconditioned. It is not that there is some *thing* out there, or in our mind, which is not the product of personal practices and biological realities. The Buddha's point was not to assert some extra-causal entities but, rather, to make a claim about the causal process. As the Buddha is often quoted as saying:

> The Tathāgata has proclaimed the cause of those things (*dhamma*) that arise from causes. And, the great ascetic is the one who taught the cessation of those things (*dhamma*)].[29]

Kleśa arise from certain causes, and, by removing those causes, they can be gotten rid of. Far from an assertion of uncaused unconditioned entities, the Buddha's account of liberation comes out of his relentless commitment to the universality of causal processes.

Where does this leave Vatsagotra's question of what happens to the Tathāgata after death? We have already seen how, for Vasubandhu and other Buddhist philosophers, Vatsagotra was asking a loaded question, assuming a real Self. Buddhist naturalists choose, however, to see the Buddha's silence on this question as evidence of his rejection of speculative metaphysics. So construed,

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[29] Vin *i,* 140: *ye dhammā hetuppabhavā, tesaṃ hetuṃ tathāgato āha/ tesañca yo nirodho, evaṃvādī mahāsamaṇo.*

however, we might wonder whether the Buddha wasn't more forthcoming. Since it is emphatically the case that nothing survives death, and since "nirvāṇa" is better understood as a life-skill than a perduring state, the Buddha's answer ought to have been more straightforward, along the lines of: "No, Vatsagotra, the Tathāgata doesn't exist after death, period. Get over it."

How to explain the Buddha's silence on the unanswered questions (*avyākṛta*) is at the core of Buddhist hermeneutics; and, at least in this sense, Buddhist naturalism continues the tradition. According to the naturalist's interpretation, the Buddha's empiricism was such that not only did he refuse to posit postmortem states, but his rejection of *a priori* metaphysics likewise prevented him from speculating about their nonexistence. As Kalupahana argued the case:

> Therefore the silence of the Buddha with regard to these questions seems to have been prompted by the limitations of empiricism—the very same reason the Buddha refused to answer questions about the extent and duration of the universe…
> Thus, according to our understanding of the early Buddhist texts, the silence of the Buddha regarding these ten questions is due entirely to the limitations of empiricism, and not to the inability of concepts to describe a transcendental reality.[30]

The Buddha was silent because both affirming or denying the existence of the Tathāgata after death presupposes that we are in a position to know about such things one way or another. Denying postmortem states would have betrayed his empiricism just as much as affirming them would.

Whether such naturalized nirvāṇa is a preferrable alternative comes down to a question of diagnosis: Is the fundamental problem of the human condition, the Truth of Suffering, a matter of pathological psychological states, or is the problem to be found somewhere in our thrownness into causal processes beyond our control? In the previous section, I worked to show how, according to the Abhidharma, the problem is causality. If that is the problem, a naturalized nirvāṇa is indeed

[30] Kalupahana, *Causality—the Central Philosophy of Buddhism*, 183.

woefully insufficient for the task at hand. But, of course, that isn't the problem, at least if you ask a naturalist. Since the problem, on their analysis, is psychological, there is nothing wrong with their psychological solution. As such, the real task for naturalizing Buddhism isn't jettisoning supernatural beliefs. That is just a distraction. If you want to naturalize Buddhism, the real question is where to locate the Truth of Suffering.

2.2. Enter the Abhidharma

Turning now to the Abhidharma, conditioning in one form or another is our problem; the unconditioned is the resolution of that problem. Since the unconditioned is the quality of not being conditioned (*saṃskṛta*), our prospects for getting a tangible grasp on it are as good as our prospects for understanding the conditioned in some not-so-speculative way. Insofar as conditioning can simply mean the way in which effects are determined by previous causes and conditions, we at least have a place to start.

Our suffering stems from the fact that we are controlled by causes and conditions. We don't want to suffer, have unpleasant experiences, get sick or die—and, if we were in control, we would not. The situation in which we do find ourselves is that, due to the inexorable march of causal chains far outside of our control, unpleasant and unwished for events are the norm.[31] As we are all only too aware, at times, these causal trajectories can be horribly cruel—young mothers die before their child is weaned, babies die before their father's eyes. The point, however, is that, probabilistically speaking, if we accept that what we experience is the product of causes over which we have only limited control, and we accept that these causes are not benignly arranged to ensure

[31] Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, 61; Harris, "Suffering and the Shape of Well-Being in Buddhist Ethics," 251; Ziporyn, *Emptiness and Omnipresence: An Essential Introduction to Tiantai Buddhism*, 18; Garfield, *Buddhist Ethics: A Philosophical Exploration*, 76–77.

our satisfaction, then bad things, horrible things, painful things, are a predictable outcome. When we are fortunate enough to say “life is good,” as we inevitably do, strictly speaking we are simply referring to a lucky streak, like someone winning at the slot machine. The longer we play, the more likely our luck will change. Play long enough, a turn for the worse is almost guaranteed.

This much is as close as we are going to get to something we might all acknowledge as a matter of fact. Now, according to Buddhist texts, the causality determining the course and content of our lives is bound up with intentional actions or karma. The idea behind Buddhist reflections on how we suffer is that the direction of these causal chains of conditioning is affected by what we have done in the past, previous lives included, as well as by what we do now. The upside of this is that, on this version of things, we have slightly better odds of being able to get causality to cooperate with our desires, *if* we are able to live virtuously, creating causes that lead to the sorts of experiences we crave. Ethical practices ensure that we can influence the odds in our favor.

That said, however, this influence is limited and must not be overstated. Since there are an incalculable number of causes already in play, distal causal chains and karmic patterns stretching back farther than we can imagine, virtue only temporarily increases our odds. Instead of randomly playing slot machines, now we are a skilled gambler playing blackjack. Even though we get to choose whether we are dealt another card, we still cannot control the cards we are dealt. No matter how good we get at accumulating virtuous causes, in the long run, we will still lose.

The solution is to get rid of whatever it is that makes us subject to causality. Although we cannot get rid of causality per se, we can get rid of the particular ingredients that keep us tied to causality. We are subject to causality insofar as we are constituted by aggregates or *skandha*, the physical and mental bundles of causes upon which we base our personal identity. The key to transcending causality is to get rid of the aggregates. Since our present body and mind are a *fait*

accompli, there is nothing to be done about them. Freedom is attained by getting rid of the causes for future aggregates or continued embodied existence.

What are the necessary causes for embodied existence or, more literally, taking on (*upādāna*) aggregates? *Kleśa*.[32] Without getting into the details, the idea here is that the assembly of pieces that we think of as a Self, our thoughts and feelings, arms and legs, are simply bound together, without any inherent unity. What binds them is our craving (*tṛṣnā*) to exist. We tie ourselves into Selves, and suffer the consequences.

Strictly speaking, to be clear, it is not so much that we separate ourselves from causality but, rather, that we drop the whole quest for personal identity. Imagine a group of guys who get together every Friday for darts, under the pretext that they like each other, and that they like darts. Since neither is true, every get-together is tiresome and disappointing. Now, when they wake up to the fact that they'd rather be anywhere else, they disband—no more Friday night darts. The group was the problem. Freedom is found in letting the group go. My point here is simply that it is misleading to say the group is finally free of dart-night, as if the group somehow continued. Likewise, it is equally misleading to say that we shall disentangle ourselves from causality—as if we go on to do something, cause free.

In its most basic sense, the unconditioned refers to this stopping of *kleśa*, precisely because it is these cognitive and affective errors that form us into the sort of creatures that are subject to causality. It is for this reason that many early canonical descriptions of the unconditioned simply describe it as the destruction of *kleśa*.

[32] In the Kośa, Vasubandhu puts this in terms of *dispositions* (*anuśaya*) which, depending on context and philosophical persuasion, can refer either to *kleśa* or to their dormant (*prasupta*) traces (AK 5.1; AKbh, 279): "Dispositions are the root of samsaric existence" (AK 5.1: *mūlaṃ bhavasyānuśayāḥ*). For discussion, see Park, *Vasubandhu, Śrīlāta, and the Sautrāntika Theory of Seeds*, 379 ff.

> And what, bhikkhus, is the unconditioned? The destruction of lust, the destruction of hatred, the destruction of delusion: this is called the unconditioned.[33]

Through meditation and insight, practitioners get rid of the delusion (*moha*) or ignorance (*avidyā*) that we are a Self.[34] When we no longer misunderstand ourselves as having a Self, we no longer have the root causes of kleśa.[35] Without kleśa, there are no longer the causes necessary to appropriate (*upādāna*) or take on aggregates. Since, without aggregates, we are no longer subject to causality, this is what it means to attain the unconditioned.

Now, where things start to get thorny is that Buddhist philosophers insist that this freedom from kleśa, what we are calling "nirvāṇa," is itself unconditioned. Attaining the unconditioned doesn't just mean leaving *kleśa* behind, it means that the freedom that is the goal of Buddhist practices is itself not subject to causality. After all, supposing nirvāṇa were conditioned, we'd be back where we started, subject to causes. If this distinction is not clear, consider the example of space (*ākāśa*) which, according to the *Kośa*, is also unconditioned.[36] Since space is in no way a cessation of conditioning, when Vasubandhu says that it is unconditioned, he is not talking about what space removes or gets rid of—what he means is that space is not made or affected by causes.

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[33] SN iv, 359: *katamañca, bhikkhave, asaṅkhataṃ? yo, bhikkhave, rāgakkhayo dosakkhayo mohakkhayo — idaṃ vuccati, bhikkhave, asaṅkhataṃ/* Translation by Bhikkhu Bodhi (*The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, 1372). For its place in early canonical discussions, see Vetter (*The Ideas and Meditative Practices of Early Buddhism*, 16).

[34] AK 3.21.

[35] AKbh, 461.

[36] AK, 1.5 Crucially, the unconditioned is not a mysterious *sui generis* property of nirvāṇa but, apparently, a more general feature that, at a minimum, is common to space and so-called "non-analytic cessations" (*apratisaṃkhyānirodha*). Note that this is in marked contrast to the Pali Abhidhamma in which only nibbana is unconditioned (Cousins, "Nibbana and Abhidhamma"; Hwang, *Metaphor and Literalism in Buddhism: The Doctrinal History of Nirvana*, 68). For a general discussion of space in Sarvāstivada, see Dhammajoti, *Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma*, 491–96, but also see Conze, *Buddhist Thought in India: Three Phases of Buddhist Philosophy*, 163–66; McMahan, *Empty Vision: Metaphor and Visionary Imagery in Mahāyāna Buddhism*, 76–81; Ruegg, *The Buddhist Philosophy of the Middle: Essays on Indian and Tibetan Madhyamaka*, 177; Apple, "The Knot Tied with Space": Notes on a Previously Unidentified Stanza in Buddhist Literature and Its Citation.," 174–78). Yaśomitrā also attributes the view that only nirvāṇa is unconditioned to the Vātsīputrīya (SA, 15) but see also Sharf, "Chan Cases," 85.

At least according to his overwhelmingly influential account in the *Abhidharmakośa*, this is also the sense in which nirvāṇa is unconditioned—the elimination of *kleśa* and delusion is neither produced nor affected by causes.[37]

2.3. Is Nirvāṇa a Thing?

Going back to Vatsagotra's original question about whether the Tathāgata survives nirvāṇa, badly formed and assumption laden though it may have been, tangled up in his doubt is a more basic metaphysical concern about whether nirvana is simply a cessation, 'a snuffing out,' like the proverbial extinguishing of a flame, or something positive, perhaps a state, condition, or entity.[38] If nirvāṇa, that permanent unconditioned culmination of the Buddhist path, exists in some positive sense, then Vatsagotra has his answer—the Tathāgata continues after death, at least in some form. If, on the other hand, "nirvana" just refers to the elimination of any *kleśa* or future birth, perhaps the Tathāgata does not survive his final nirvana.

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[37] This point is nicely summarized by Chim, a most influential Tibetan commentator on the *Kośa* whom we shall meet shortly:

> What are the three sorts of unconditioned entities? Space and the two: analytic cessations and non-analytic cessations. Why so? Because they are not conditioned by causes and conditions.
>
> (*mchims mdzod*, 20: *'o na 'dus ma byas rnam pa gsum po nyid gang zhe na nam kha' dang ni so sor brtags 'gog dang brtags min gyi 'gog pa gnyis so/ ci ste na / rgyu rkyen gyis mngon par 'dus ma byas pa'i phyir ro*.)

[38] Here I am using "positive" and "negative" in a metaphysical sense, not in the sense of "life-affirming" or "life-denying." In the sense that I am using the terms here, a positive account also tells us what there is, whereas a negative one only says what there is not. Although I am unable to discuss it here, it is worth noting that, alongside the premodern Buddhist debates over "positive" and "negative" interpretations of nirvana that I discuss here, the question also has roots in nineteenth-century Europe where it was bound up with the question of whether Buddhism was a pessimistic religion, most famously in the writings of Schopenhauer (Welbon, "On Understanding the Buddhist Nirvāṇa"; Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities: Utopias of the Pali Imaginaire*, 98; Dumoulin, "Buddhism and Nineteenth-Century German Philosophy," 467).

Let us start with the idea that there is *something* that is nirvāṇa.[39] As I alluded to earlier, in the *Kośa*, Vasubandhu offers a minimalist positive account of nirvāṇa:

> Its nature is to be personally experienced (*pratyātmavedya*) only by Āryas. This much, however, can be said: there is a separate (*antara*) substance (*dravya*) which is permanent and good (*kuśala*).[40]

Vasubandhu leaves much unspecified here, but I am not going to try to flesh that out. Others have tried. There is, in fact, a substantial literature on the question of whether that "something" is a mental state.[41] Since we do not need to answer these questions for our purposes, why needlessly make our inquiry any more speculative?

In any case, when Vasubandhu says that nirvāṇa is a separate substance (*antaradravya*), he is, in fact, already saying a great deal. As this chapter and the following one proceed, I will be increasingly focused on Buddhist philosophers who thought that there is *not* something that is nirvāṇa, either because nirvāṇa simply designates the fact that no more *kleśa* or suffering are headed our way, or because nirvāṇa is beyond any affirmation or negation. In the context of this larger dialectic, saying nirvāṇa is something, or, in Vasubandhu terms, that it is a substance or *dravya*, is, in fact, quite significant. Even more so because Vasubandhu qualifies this something, adding that it is separate (*antara*) or "other." In so saying, while he is pointing out that nirvāṇa is

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[39]Collins offers an insightful analysis of the notion that nirvāṇa genuinely exists, albeit within the context of the Pali canon (Collins, *Nirvāṇa and Other Buddhist Felicities*, 164 & 172).

[40] AKbh, 92: *āryair eva tatsvabhāvaḥ pratyātmavedyaḥ / etāvat tu śakyate vaktum nityaṃ kuśalaṃ cāsti dravyāntaram.*

[41] Johansson, *The Psychology of Nirvana*; Harvey, *The Selfless Mind: Personality, Consciousness and Nirvana in Early Buddhism*; Polak, "Can Cessation Be a Cognitive State? Philosophical Implications of the Apophatic Teachings of the Early Buddhist Nikāyas"; Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities: Utopias of the Pali Imaginaire*, 201.

distinct in some general sense of having its own ontology, more immediately, he may also be underscoring that nirvāṇa is something more than just the mere cessation of *kleśa*.[42]

Let us suppose this much is true. That is, even though we don't know anything else about it, nirvāṇa is an unconditioned something, ontologically distinct from a mere negation, and altogether different from our conditioned aggregates. And let us suppose that this ontologically distinct something is good (*kuśala*), even the highest (*agra*) good, and that, in virtue of being unconditioned, it is permanent.[43] Where would this leave the question of what happens to the Tathāgata after death? It would seem that, postmortem, there is something of the Tathāgata or the Arhat that remains. It is true that this something probably doesn't amount to a self, in even the most minimal sense. Since, as we have seen, it is quite likely that Vatsagotra was assuming some sort of *ātman* when he asked his question, there is certainly still room for the Buddha to leave the question unanswered. Nevertheless, however, no matter how badly formed or wrapped in assumptions his question might have been, at the core he was wondering whether this "nirvāṇa" that everyone was so excited about transcended death. If the Sarvāstivādins are right, and there is something that is nirvāṇa, we feel pushed to answer his question affirmatively.

What are we to make of such a view? Is this a Buddhist version of achieving immortality? Indeed, as I will discuss at length in chapter four, nirvāṇa, and particularly nirvāṇa after death, is often called "*amṛta*," literally translated as "deathless" but conceivably also as "immortal." For the sake of clarity, let us separate the question of transcending death (in some yet to be defined way) from the question of personal survival. The latter question asks what will happen to me when I die? There are certainly Indian beliefs in personal survival. We find versions of this early on in

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[42] For a discussion of Vasubandhu's claim in its rhetorical context, see Hwang, *Metaphor and Literalism in Buddhism: The Doctrinal History of Nirvana*, 98).

[43] AKbh, 93.

the Upaṇiṣhads, which certainly could have been absorbed into Buddhist philosophical thinking, as well as latter in the Gīta when, for instance, Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna that the *ātman* is neither born nor dies, is not killed when the body is killed but, instead, goes from one body to the next, like a man changing clothes.[44]

As the *Gīta* brings out so well, the question of personal survival after death only makes sense if we have a strong view of personal identity. Since neither the *Gīta* nor Buddhists are proposing a resurrection in the flesh, any personal survival requires that there is a meaningful sense of who I am independent of my body and at least a good chunk of my mental life. Since the Buddhists we are talking about here reject that kind of personal identity, personal survival isn't a question for them.[45] This much is fairly obvious.

What is not so obvious is that Buddhist critiques of an *ātman* who passes from this life to the next, like someone changing clothes, were not always rejections of continuity *per se*. To see why, consider the example of the space inside of a teacup. When the cup breaks, we can no longer differentiate the space inside the cup from the space all around us. At this point, somebody might come along and say that the space of the teacup continues even after the teacup is in pieces. I disagree. But, the reason I disagree is because I don't think that, at this point, there is any reason to call what remains "the space in the teacup," not because I think that space itself has somehow disappeared. Similarly, in contrast to a physicalist perspective, according to which the only thing that would survive beyond brain death are our physical corpse and the social traces in the lives of others, the Abhidharma intuition appears to be that whatever continues after death can't be construed in terms of personal identity. The problem is not continuity but, rather, trying to construe

[44] *Bhagavadgīta,* 74.

[45] It is an open question how different this would be for Pugalavādin Buddhists (Duerlinger, *The Refutation of the Self in Indian Buddhism*, 131).

this continuity in terms of personal identity. This is, in fact, another cogent explanation of the unanswered question of what happens after death—the Buddha was not willing to assert the impossible, a self independent of the body and the mind, but nor did he want to deny that something continues, so he remained silent.

When viewed through an Indian lens, however, such continuity looks very different from how it appears from either Christian or a contemporary secular perspective, where the hope is that we might survive death in some form. Although the Sarvāstivāda claim that there is some thing that is nirvāṇa does amount to a belief in postmortem continuity, this belief looks altogether different in the context of endless rebirth. Problems of personal identity aside, continuity is guaranteed by the very fabric of the cosmos—it is not something to be earned or even wished for. In fact, the reverse is true—what takes work, and what is worth striving for, is release from that continuity. In light of this, without trying to get into Vatsagotra's head, we can still imagine that what prompted his question was not Keat's *"When I have fears that I may cease to be*."[46] Perhaps his question was as idle and speculative as it is sometimes portrayed or, perhaps, it was prompted by fears that he might never cease to be.[47]

Admittedly, we do seem to be getting into some spooky territory, but it is worth trying to put a finer point on why and in what sense. One philosophical reason we might want to reject this metaphysical notion that there is some thing that is the elimination of suffering might come out of a more general rejection of supernatural agents—i.e., beings or powers that exist outside the natural world of causes and effects and yet exert influence on the natural world.[48] While this obviously

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[46] Keats, "When I Have Fears That I May Cease to Be," 336.

[47] Walser, *Nāgārjuna in Context: Mahāyāna Buddhism and Early Indian Culture*, 205.

[48] Flanagan, "Varieties of Naturalism," 433.

excludes an interventionist God, for many contemporary philosophers this also excludes the idea that the mind can be ontologically distinct from its physical correlates while still causally effecting things in the world. What about a metaphysically positive nirvāṇa? Is it also undermined by an all-out rejection of supernatural agents?

No. Supposing nirvāṇa was a causal thing, a product of the path, then there would indeed be the problem of natural causes having supernatural effects but, as it is, nirvāṇa is neither an agent nor a power, nor is it affected by natural causes.[49] In fact, Buddhist philosophers would agree with naturalists that if nirvāṇa were a cause, this would create real trouble—as far as they are concerned, nothing is more of an anathema than an unconditioned cause. To see this, we need only recall Dharmakīrti's argument that, if the cause were permanent, it would have to either constantly be producing its effect or never produce it at all. Should we say that such a cause produces its effect at one point and not an another, this would contradict the claim that it was unchanging.[50] If there is a deep tension between Buddhist metaphysical accounts of nirvāṇa and naturalism, we have not found it yet.[51]

2.4. Causal Explicability & the Paradox of Liberation

Where the real problem lies is in the tension between a causal account of spiritual freedom on the one hand and the view that nirvāṇa is unconditioned by any causality, on the other. We will get

[49] Gowans, *Philosophy of the Buddha*, 151. While Jay Garfield has suggested that Buddhists' commitment to causal dependent-arising pushes towards a causal conception of nirvāṇa, for the reasons I discuss here, it is difficult to imagine how any Buddhist philosopher worth his salt could pull this off (Garfield, "Throwing out the Buddha with the Offering Water: Comments on Evan Thompson's Why I Am Not a Buddhist," 22).

[50] Westerhoff, *The Golden Age of Indian Buddhist Philosophy*, 232.

[51] Papineau has pointed out how the argument that supernatural events or entities cannot exert a causal influence on physical processes only applies to categories that have effects, not mathematical and modal realms, and, as we are seeing here, not nirvāṇa (Papineau, "Naturalism," 5).

into the details shortly but, in a nutshell, the philosophical task for most Buddhist philosophers, Abhidharma thinkers most of all, is to give a causal account of why we suffer and how we end it. This is, after all, precisely what the Four Noble Truths are about—the Truth of Origins causally explains the Truth of Suffering; the Truth of the Path causally explains how we get to the Truth of Cessation. In its roughest form, the problem is simply a matter of reconciling the unconditioned with a commitment to causal explicability.

To begin, we should start with the possibility that there is nothing problematic about the claim that the unconditioned is produced by the path. Jay Garfield has urged this view on the grounds that, when Buddhist philosophers talk about the unconditioned, they don't mean something unaffected by causes. Garfield takes the unconditioned (*asaṃskṛta*) in this context to mean either: a) that nirvāṇa requires no further conditions to sustain it, insofar as it is irreversible and b) that one's mind is free from a particular network of conditioning.[52] It is true enough that, if this is what unconditioned means, the only puzzle is why anyone was ever puzzled by this so-called paradox.

This is not, however, what Buddhist philosophers meant by unconditioned. As we shall see shortly, Vasubandhu goes to great lengths to explain how nirvāṇa is not an effect (*kārya*) produced by the path. Even though there are, indeed, points at which Buddhist philosophers will also speak of the unconditioned as not conditioned by *kleśa* and karma, no one thought that nirvāṇa was produced by causes and conditions.[53] Or, in other words, although there are many ways of

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[52] Garfield, "Throwing out the Buddha with the Offering Water: Comments on Evan Thompson's Why I Am Not a Buddhist," 22.

[53] See, for instance, the *Abhidharmasamuccayabhāṣya*'s explanation of the unconditioned as meaning not conditioned by karma and *kleśa* (ASbh, 24): *karmakleśānabhisaṃskṛtatārthenāsaṃskṛtam eveti*. For a discussion of the *Bhāṣya's* authorship, see Walpola Rāhula, Abhidharmasamuccaya*: The Compendium of the Higher Teaching (Philosophy)*, 292. Also, another related restricted sense of condition is in terms of being conditioned (*kṛta*) by "me" and "mine" (PV 2.135).

specifying which conditions are most relevant when we say something is unconditioned, nirvāṇa was still also understood as unconditioned in the most general sense.

Nor is this a peculiarity of the Abhidharma. Nāgārjuna and his commentaries understood the unconditioned as a freedom from causes and, in the orbit of Yogācāra commentaries, Sthiramati succinctly explains what Vasubandhu means when he says that the resultant state is "stable" (*dhruva*):[54]

> "Stable" since it is permanent, in virtue of being indestructible. "Blissful" because it is permanent, since whatever is impermanent is suffering. And this is permanent, so it is blissful.[55]

Indian Buddhist thinkers seem to have been unequivocal on this point—since any causal conditioning entails suffering, to say that nirvāṇa is unconditioned, first and foremost, is to claim that it is unaffected by causes and conditions.

Later Tibetan commentators do eventually separate these two senses of unconditioned—something can be unconditioned by karma and kleśa but still conditioned by causality—but they are no closer to the claim that the elimination of suffering was conditioned by causes. So, for instance, the 15th century Panchen Sonam Drakpa (1478–1554) would eventually distinguish these two sense of conditioning in order to explain how the Buddha's mind was unconditioned by kleśa and karma but still causal, still the effect of the bodhisattva's path and the cause of the Buddha's action in the world.[56] Crucially, however, even when these two sense of unconditioned come apart,

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[54] MMK 7.1 & 7.33; PsP, 145 & 176; Tr 30. While this is clear enough on the Indian side, Garfield's near influence, Je Tsongkhapa, also makes it explicit that the cessation of *kleśa* and birth is causally inert (*dngos med*) (*rigs pa'i rgya mtsho*, ii 334).

[55] TrBh(Skt), 142: *dhruvo nityatvād akṣayatayā / sukho nityatvād eva yad anityaṃ tad duḥkhaṃ ayaṃ ca nitya iti tasmāt sukhaḥ.*

[56] *phar phyin spyi don*, 119.

nirvāṇa is still permanent and unaffected by causes, just as much for Sonam Drakpa as for Sthiramati.

We find this commitment to universal causal explicability running into similar trouble in the contemporary philosophy of mathematics. Since mathematical objects—numbers, sets, function—are not spatiotemporal entities and do not seem to be causal in any sense, how do we come to know mathematical facts? The tension here is that, on the one hand, naturalists would like to take mathematical knowledge as an uncontroversial case of reliable belief, and, on the other hand, they believe epistemology should be explicable in the *a posteriori* terms of natural science (which requires experimenting or some other form of causal interaction). How do we form reliable beliefs about objects that are causally isolated from us?[57] The most common naturalistic response to this problem is irrealism or nominalism about numbers—there are no such abstract entitles.[58]

An uncaused thing is also a problem for many Buddhist philosophers, albeit not for the Sarvāstivādin of the *Kośa*. In their terms, anything existent (*bhāva*) must be conditioned.[59] While this objection seems to be anticipated in the *Kośa* by Sautrāntika objections to the Sarvāstivāda claim that nirvāṇa is a thing (*dravya*), it is Dharmakīrti who fully thinks through the problem.[60]

For Dharmakīrti, the problem with an unconditioned thing is that, on the one hand, knowledge of something is a precondition for asserting that it exists, and, on other hand, it is the causal relations between objects and experience that allows us to know that they exist. In the case of sense

[57] Benacerraf, "Mathematical Truth," 673; Paseau, "Naturalism in the Philosophy of Mathematics," 35; Papineau, "Naturalism," 20.

[58] Papineau, "Naturalism," 20; Field, *Science without Numbers: A Defence of Nominalism*.

[59] Although it is Dharmakīrti and his commentators who argues this point most systematically, we also see this in Nāgārjuna and later Madhyamaka commentaries (MMK 25.5; PsP, 526).

[60] AKbh, 92; Dunne, *Foundations of Dharmakīrti's Philosophy*, 84 ff. Likewise, Nāgārjuna and later Madhyamaka commentators argue that an unconditioned things is impossible (MMK 25.5; PsP, 526).

perception, the causal properties of the tree (or, more precisely, properties of the atomic bits on the basis of which we form concepts of trees) interact with our physical sense organs to produce a mental image of the object. The end result of this causal chain is what we call "perception" (*pratyakṣa*).[61] Although, as Dharmakīrti took such pains to explain, we can develop inferences (*anumāna*) about things we cannot see, as in the paradigmatic case of inferring fire from seeing smoke, the causal relation to the particular is still essential, albeit through a more circuitous route—our inference is grounded in our perception of smoke which, in turn, is the effect of the fire.[62] Even though abstractions or universals (*sāmānyalakṣaṇa*) are essential to thought and language, lacking this causal connection to our experience, they must be understood as unreal fictions, instrumentally useful for navigating in a world of particulars.[63]

As important as these epistemological considerations are, however, the problem runs deeper. To make philosophical sense of the Four Noble Truth you don't need to accept Dharmakīrti's epistemology and, indeed, despite its profound influence of subsequent Buddhist thought, his empiricism would remain controversial. Many Buddhist philosophers, both before and after Dharmakīrti, thought that knowledge of uncaused things made good sense. No matter our epistemological preference, the more basic problem is that the claim that the path causally accounts

[61] PV 3.224. Dunne, 84 & 85 fn.51.

[62] Although the causal connection between the inference and the particular is more obvious when inferring from an effect to a cause (*kāryahetu*), the same connection explains the reliability of a *svabhāva-hetu* and an *anupalabdhi-hetu* (Gillon and Hayes, "Dharmakīrti on the Role of Causation in Inference as Presented in Pramāṇavārttika Svopajñavṛtti 11–38," 363; Bogacz and Tanaka, "Dharmakīrtian Inference," 600). So, for instance, when I use the fact of being a product to infer that sound is impermanent, it is my perception of sound that shows me that sound arises from conditions which, in turn, is what I use to then infer that it is impermanent.

[63] Dunne, *Foundations of Dharmakīrti's Philosophy*, 93–94.

for liberation contradicts the notion that nirvāṇa is unconditioned. This contradiction is what has been called the "paradox of liberation."[64]

The "paradox" or puzzle here is that since anything unconditioned, by definition, cannot be produced or affected by causes, how this elimination of suffering comes about seems mysterious, if not impossible. Here's one way to put it: since, at point *a*, we are suffering but, further down the line, at point *b*, we have eliminated suffering, there must be some process that explains how we get from one point to the other. So construed, however, the elimination of suffering at point *b* is a product of that process, what Buddhists call the "path" or *marga*. As a product of a causal processes, however, the elimination of suffering must be conditioned (*samskṛta*).

Our final task for this chapter is to consider just how big of problem this poses. There is a lot riding on this for my argument, since the overarching goal of this chapter is to show that this "paradox" is troublesome enough that it is worth reconsidering our assumption that there is movement from point *a* to point *b* or, as I have been putting it thus far, that suffering is to be gotten rid of. In order to get to the real issue, let us start by setting aside the question of whether this constitutes a genuine paradox. A philosophical problem can be insurmountable without being a paradox, insofar as we use the term "paradox" to refer to cases where true premises lead to contradiction, like the Liar's paradox, for instance. As we are about to see, Buddhist philosophers, Vasubandhu most of all, came up with ways to avoid such a contradiction, even if other philosophers would find these attempts ultimately unsatisfactory. Our question, rather, is whether this puzzle poses a serious problem, the kind that might motivate us to reconsider our starting point.

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[64] Sharf, "Chan Cases"; Thompson, *Why I Am Not a Buddhist*, 80; Garfield, "Throwing out the Buddha with the Offering Water: Comments on Evan Thompson's Why I Am Not a Buddhist," 22.

Attaining the unconditioned troubled Vasubandhu, precisely because, for him, nirvāṇa was unaffected by causes and conditions. What Garfield is right to point out is that Indian and Tibetan thinkers, Vasubandhu most of all, did not *think* of this as an insoluble paradox but, rather, a puzzle that demanded ingenious solutions.[65]

For Vasubandhu, the problem centers around the seeming contradiction between the claim that nirvāṇa is the effect of the path and the claim that nirvāṇa is free of causality by virtue of being unconditioned. In other words, how can you have an uncaused effect? In the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, after saying that nirvāṇa is an effect (*phala*),[66] an interlocutor objects:

> In that case, since [that] unconditioned thing is an effect, there should be a cause of which it is the effect. And, since [that unconditioned thing] is a cause, there should be an effect of which it is the cause.[67]

The objection here is that any effect must have a cause and vice versa, to which Vasubandhu simply agrees that unconditioned things do not have causes and effects:

> Only conditioned things have causes and effects.
> The unconditioned is without these two. [AK2.55d]
> Why? Because it can neither have the six sorts of causes nor the five sorts of effects.[68]

At this point Vasubandhu seems to have only deepened our perplexity—nirvāṇa is an effect, but it has no causes and no effects. The troubling part of this, of course, is the claim of an uncaused

[65] Garfield, "Throwing out the Buddha with the Offering Water: Comments on Evan Thompson's Why I Am Not a Buddhist," 22.

[66] AK 2.55.

[67] AKbh, 91: *evaṃ tarhi phalatvād asaṃskṛtasya hetunā bhavitavyaṃ yasya tat phalaṃ hetutvāc ca phalena bhavitavyaṃ yasya taddhetuḥ.*

[68] AKbh, 91: *saṃskṛtasyaiva dharmasya hetuphale bhavataḥ.*

2.55d: *nāsaṃskṛtasya te/*

kiṃ kāraṇam/ ṣaḍvidhahetvasaṃbhavāt pañcavidhaphalāsaṃbhavācca.

effect. More particularly, how can nirvāṇa be the effect of the path even though it is not caused by the path?

It makes sense to hold that nirvāṇa is the effect of the path because it is the path that causes us to attain nirvāṇa. At least in his Sarvāstivādin mode, Vasubandhu's answer is that practicing the path causes us to obtain (*prāpti*) nirvāṇa, but it does not cause nirvāṇa itself. Obtaining or *prāpti*, at least according to this distinctly Sarvāstivādin way of thinking about it, has its own causality independent of the thing attained.[69] Vasubandhu makes this point as follows, here using the term separation or *visaṃyoga* interchangeably with analytical cessation (*pratisaṃkhyānirodha*):[70]

> "In this case, what is [separation] the effect of? Or, how is it an effect?"
> [Separation] is the effect of the path because there is obtaining (*prāpti*) [of it] through the force of that [path].
> [Objection:] In that case, only the obtaining (*prāpti*) counts as the effect of the path, since the [path] has efficacy in regard to the obtaining, not the separation.[71]
> [Reply:] In one way, that [path] is efficacious for the obtaining, and in another way, it is efficacious for separation. How is there efficacy with respect to obtaining (*prāpti*)? Through making it arise (*utpādana*). How is there efficacy with respect to separation? Through leading (*prāpaṇa*) to separation. Therefore, to begin with, the path is not in any way the cause of this [separation], but separation is its result.[72]

Vasubandhu's distinction here is that the path produces (*utpādana*) obtaining (*prāpti*) but *leads* (*prāpaṇa*) to separation or nirvāṇa. This solution maintains the connection between the path and

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[69] Vasubandhu discusses *prāpti* in AKbh (p.62) but also in his *Pañcaskadhaka* (4.2.1). For a discussion of *prāpti* see Cox, "Attainment through Abandonment: The Sarvāstivādin Path of Removing Defilements," 87; Cox, *Disputed Dharmas, Early Buddhist Theories on Existence: An Annotated Translation of the Section of Factors Dissociated from Thought from Saṇghabhadra's* Nyāyānusāra, 88; Hwang, *Metaphor and Literalism in Buddhism: The Doctrinal History of Nirvana*, 93.

[70] AKbh, 91.

[71] Following Yaśomitrā in taking the capacity as not being "for" or "with respect to" separation (AAsa, 217: *tatra visaṃyoge*).

[72] AKbh, 91: *kasyedānīṃ tat phalaṃ kathaṃ vā / mārgasya phalam tadbalena prāpteḥ / prāptir eva tarhi mārgasya phalaṃ prāpnoti / tasyām eva tasya sāmarthyān na visaṃyogaḥ / anyathā hy asya prāptau sāmarthyam anyathā visaṃyoge / katham asya prāptau sāmarthyam / utpādanāt / kathaṃ visaṃyoge / prapaṇāt / tasmān na tāvad asya mārgaḥ kathañ cid api hetuḥ / phalaṃ cāsya visaṃyogaḥ.*
Note that, in keeping with the reading reflected in my translation above, I have altered Pradhan's breaking of the text as "*kathaṃ vā mārgasya phalam / tad*" to "*kathaṃ vā / mārgasya phalam.*"

the goal, since the path is still what leads to nirvāṇa. The point here is that it is only in this sense that nirvāṇa is the effect of the path, not in the sense that the path causes or affects nirvāṇa in any way.

Nor is this the scholastic quibbling that it may seem. In effect, Vasubandhu is articulating a notion of discovery. So, for instance, in the philosophy of science, while it uncontroversial that particular sociological conditions and structures of power cause and condition our discovery of certain laws of physics, for most contemporary philosophers, this does not entail that these laws themselves are the product of social conditioning (admittedly this distinction sometimes gets lost in some contemporary discussions). Vasubandhu wants to say that the same distinction holds for nirvāṇa—it is not created but, reached, obtained, or discovered.

What are we to make of this? Are we to conclude that nirvāṇa has no relationship to the path at all, that the path is not part of the explanation for why there is nirvāṇa? Was your nirvāṇa always there, or does it just have a knack for showing up just when you've completed the path? Chim Jampalyang (ca. 1245-1325), author of the most authoritative Tibetan commentary to the *Kośa*, seems to be edging towards these doubts when he asks:[73]

> [Objection:] Is it not the case that an analytical cessation is conditioned (*mngon par 'dus byas pa*) by the path? How is it then said to be unconditioned?[74]

The objection here has force: an analytical cessation is by definition a cessation (*nirodha*) that is to be obtained (*prāpya*) by analysis (*pratisaṃkhyā*) or wisdom (*prajñā*).[75] Are we to imagine that this analytic cessation existed prior to, or at least independent of, the analysis or wisdom?

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[73] Coghlan, "Translator's Introduction," ii.

[74] *mchims mdzod*, 19: *gal te so sor brtags 'gog ni lam gyis mngon par 'dus byas pa min nam ci'i phyir 'dus ma byas su brjod ce na.*

[75] AKbh, 4.

3. Negative Nirvāṇa

Or, then again, you can try to avoid the paradox by denying that nirvāṇa is a thing with its own ontology. You can be a nominalist about it, and think that this elimination of suffering is just what it sounds like, a negation, a conceptual abstraction that allows us to designate the terminus and goal of the Buddhist path. So it is that some Buddhist philosophers, most notably the so-called Sautrāntikas, chose to grab the bull by the horns, embracing the idea that our concept of nirvāṇa simply refers to the absence of *kleśa*.

The Sautrāntika first appears in the *Kośa* as a more philosophically refined interlocutor, a nominalist who denies many of the Sarvāstivāda categories and, most relevantly, argues that nirvāṇa is a mere negation or non-arising.[76] Since outside of the *Kośa* it is difficult to get a grip on the Sautrāntika school in a historically nuanced way, for our purposes, suffice it to say that the notion that nirvāṇa was a mere negation also had a busy life far outside the confines of the Abhidharma or the "Sautrāntika" label.[77] So much so, in fact, that several centuries later this view of nirvāṇa reemerges as the primary target of Candrakīrti's soteriological critique.[78]

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[76] Lamotte, *Karmasiddhiprakaraṇa: The Treatise on Action by Vasubandhu*, 25–32; Lamotte, *History of Indian Buddhism: From the Origins to the Saka Era*, 676; Kritzer, "Sautrāntika in the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*"; Cox, *Disputed Dharmas, Early Buddhist Theories on Existence: An Annotated Translation of the Section of Factors Dissociated from Thought from Saṇghabhadra's* Nyāyānusāra, 38. The fact that one comes away from the *Kośa* with a sense that the Sautrāntika got the upper hand may be because this was, in fact, the position Vasubandhu was rooting for (Kritzer, 331).

[77] The trouble spans in both directions, in the inchoate pre-doxographical debates prior to the *Kośa*, and in the after-the-fact doxographical ascriptions of "Sautrāntika" to Dharmakīrti's external realism (Dunne, *Foundations of Dharmakīrti's Philosophy*, 58 and 59 fn. 13). To confuse matters more, in his discussion of nirvāṇa in the MMK (25.7), Nāgārjuna targets the view that nirvāṇa is *abhāva* or nonexistent, raising the question of whether his opponent might have been a Sautrāntika. While Bhāviveka identifies this position as Sautrāntika (*mdo sde pa dag*) (PrPr, 236a), in the context of identifying the opponents in elsewhere in the MMK (chapter 17), Walser argues against seeing the Sautrāntika as Nāgārjuna's opponents on the grounds that there is no evidence of the school being active within his intellectual orbit (Walser, *Nāgārjuna in Context*, 229).

[78] MacDonald, "Knowing Nothing: Candrakīrti and Yogic Perception," 142.

According to the Sautrāntika, ontologically speaking, there is no such thing as nirvāṇa *per se*. Rather, we use the term nirvāṇa to refer to the absence of any further *kleśa*, an absence or non-arising (*anutpāda*) that is brought about through liberating insight (*pratisaṃkhyā*).[79] When I say that I'm out of money, for instance, while someone might ask for evidence to support my claim (empty pockets or dismal bank statements), no one thinks there is "something" that is my lack of funds, as if it could be plunked on the table, gestured towards, or at least, unpacked in positive terms. Absences are mental abstractions, and nirvāṇa is no different.[80]

In support of their radically non-affirming view of nirvāṇa, Sautrāntikas appeal to the much quoted and endlessly debated verse the Buddha's disciple Anuruddha is supposed to have uttered upon witnessing the Master's final nirvāṇa:

> The mind is freed, like the blowing out of a lamp.[81]

As has often been pointed out, this negative picture comes very close to the most basic sense of nirvāṇa as a "blowing out."[82]

The image of flame blowing out was conceptually so tightly tied to the notion of nirvāṇa, and its scriptural credentials were so impeccable that those who wanted a more positive nirvāṇa had the burden of reconciling theirs views with this negative image. But reconcile they did—nirvāṇa,

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[79] AKbh, 92, see also Hwang, *Metaphor and Literalism in Buddhism: The Doctrinal History of Nirvana*, 91 & 100.

[80] The ontological status of these uncaused abstractions or generalizations (*sāmānyalakṣaṇa*) become hotly debated in Tibet. Since, according to Dharmakīrti's ontology, an enormous amount of important stuff is relegated to this category, many Buddhist epistemologists wished to qualify this nonexistence—that such entities do not *really* or *ultimately* exist (Dreyfus, *Recognizing Reality*). Without getting into these debates, I have simply presented the issue in terms of existence and nonexistence, since this both gets at the core of the issue and accords with the antirealist intuitions of the Sakya scholars who figure so prominently in this study.

[81] As quoted in the AKbh (94) and PsP (520): *pradyotasyeva nirvāṇaṃ vimokṣastasya cetasaḥ* but also found several times in the Pali canon (e.g. SN i, 159). For discussions of how this verse has been interpreted, see Harvey, *The Selfless Mind: Personality, Consciousness and Nirvana in Early Buddhism*, 201; Hwang, *Metaphor and Literalism in Buddhism: The Doctrinal History of Nirvana*, 97 ff.

[82] Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities: Utopias of the Pali Imaginaire*, 191.

they argued, refers not to the negation but the location where this negation occurs (in other words, nirvāṇa is where the blowing happens but it is not itself a blowing out).[83] Wriggle though we may, why not simply embrace this negative conception of nirvāṇa?

Bhāviveka's great commentator, Avalokitavrata, critical of this idea that nirvāṇa is a mere negation, suggests that this was the view of Cārvāka materialists (alongside the aforementioned Sautrāntika).[84] His logic is clear enough—since the Cārvāka deny rebirth, at death one naturally achieves non-arising of any further suffering. As such, there is no difference between nirvāṇa *cum* negation and what is supposed to happen when you die according to materialists. This idea is also taken up in contemporary reflections on Buddhist naturalism: without rebirth, the non-arising of future kleśa or suffering is indistinguishable from what happens to us anyway when we die.[85] Nirvāṇa or no nirvāṇa, after death there is no more kleśa and no more suffering.

If we were to take the elimination of suffering alone as our goal while eschewing rebirth, then since the whole point of Buddhist practice was to eliminate suffering, suicide would offer the quickest and surest means to that end—or, at least, so Jan Westerhoff has argued.[86] This "suicide argument" is, in fact, a spruced up version of an old Buddhist trope—when other Buddhists offer dumbed down or overly simplistic accounts of the goal, the go-to reply for Buddhist philosophers is that this would have the "unwanted consequence of being liberated without effort" (*ayatnenaiva*

[83] AKbh, 94 and PsP, 525. See also Hwang, *Metaphor and Literalism in Buddhism: The Doctrinal History of Nirvana*, 99.

[84] In his PrPr (f.236a), Bhāviveka attributes the view that nirvāṇa is a like the going out of a flame to the Tāmraśātīya and the view that nirvāṇa is merely a non-arising (*skye ba med pa tsam ≈ anutpādamātra*) to the Sautrāntika. Avalokitavrata adds the Cārvāka to this list in his PrPrṬ (f.253a).

[85] Flanagan, *The Bodhisattva's Brain: Buddhism Naturalized*, 23 & 131; Hayes, "Dharmakīrti on Punarbhava," 128; Sharf, "Is Nirvāṇa the Same as Insentience?: Chinese Struggles with an Indian Buddhist Ideal," 145; Sharf, "Chan Cases," 85.

[86] Westerhoff, "Buddhism without Reincarnation? Examining the Prospects of a 'Naturalized' Buddhism," 148 ff.

mokṣaprasaṅga).[87] Where Buddhist philosophers have used this to debate what constitutes Awakening, Westerhoff intends his "suicide argument" as a *reductio* argument against the cherry-picking approach of contemporary naturalists.

In fact, however, these cherry-pickers are precisely the ones who would be the least convinced by such an argument. Consider how it makes perfect sense for a doctor to say that her goal is to eliminate the suffering of patients with cancer; it is hardly a reductio of her commitment to say that she ought to just kill everyone with cancer. Obvious as this is, the reason this *reductio* does not follow is that, for her—and almost everyone else these days (outside of the context of end-of-life care)—eliminating suffering and a flourishing life are two sides of the same coin. True, freedom from suffering and flourishing weren't on the same coin for premodern Buddhists, for reasons I discuss in chapter four, but Buddhist naturalists can still help themselves to this contemporary worldview. After all, their opening gambit was that Buddhism needs to adapt to our contemporary ways of seeing things. It is difficult to imagine that any modern Buddhist who is comfortable setting aside karma and rebirth would be troubled by having to draw on contemporary intuitions about the meaning of life that are alien to Buddhist texts. If our response is simply that, should they help themselves to modern notions of flourishing then they aren't Buddhists in any meaningful traditional sense, that ship already sailed when they got rid of karma and rebirth.

The claim that nirvāṇa is a purely negative achievement may also be vulnerable to another version of the old "we'd be liberated without effort" rejoinder. Given the Buddhist commitment to momentariness, if nirvāṇa is just the cessation of kleśa or birth, that very momentariness would be

[87] E.g. PsP, 527: *ayatnenaiva mokṣaprasaṅgād ity uktam evaitat*.

liberative, since cessation is happening in every moment.[88] In his *Prasannapadā*, Candrakīrti argues:

> [When the opponent] asserts: "the nonexistence of *kleśa* and birth is nirvāṇa," then, in that case, the impermanence (*anityatā*) of *kleśa* and birth would be nirvāṇa. Since impermanence is not other than the nonexistence of kleśa and birth, so that very impermanence would be nirvāṇa.[89]

Candrakīrti's argument here becomes clearer when we consider what he means by "nonexistence" or *abhāva*. While I translate *abhāva* as "nonexistence" for lack of a better word, Candrakīrti insists that what he means here is not simply ontological nonexistence like a rabbit's horn but, rather, the non-existence or ceasing of something that did exist.[90] As such, his point is that since the non-existence (*abhāva*) of *kleśa* (which is supposed to be nirvāṇa according to his opponent) just means *kleśa* ceasing to exist, there is no need for a path to accomplish something that happens anyway, whether we make effort or not.

The Sautrāntika has a response to Candrakīrti's argument—nirvāṇa is the non-arising of any new suffering brought about through insight, not just the ceasing of what has been. In the *Kośa*, the Sautrāntika rather painstakingly qualify their nirvāṇa as follows:

> An analytical cessation (*pratisaṃkhyānirodha*) is the cessation of the predispositions (*anuśaya*) and birth that have already arisen; it is the non-arising of something more (*anya*) through the force of analysis (*pratisaṃkhyā*).[91]

Candrakīrti's critique fastens onto just the cessation of the predispositions and birth that have already arisen which, admittedly, will cease of their own accord. As if anticipating something like

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[88] MacDonald, "Knowing Nothing: Candrakīrti and Yogic Perception," 142.

[89] PsP, 527: *kleśajanmanor abhāvo nirvāṇam iti cet, evaṃ tarhi kleśajanmanor anityatā nirvāṇam iti syāt / anityataiva hi kleśajanmanor abhāvo nānyat, ity ataḥ anityataiva nirvāṇaṃ syāt*.

[90] While Candrakīrti more or less says this here in his critique of nirvāṇa being *abhāva* (PsP 528), he makes this point more explicitly in his commentary to MMK 15.5 (PsP 267). See also MacDonald ("Knowing Nothing," 142).

[91] AKbh, 92: *utpannānuśayajanmanirodhaḥ pratisaṃkhyābalenānyasyānutpādaḥ pratisaṃkhyānirodhaḥ.*

Candrakīrti's argument, Vasubandhu goes on to stipulate that nirvāṇa or, as it is called here, an analytic cessation (*pratisaṃkhyānirodha*), is the non-arising of any more kleśa or birth.[92] Whatever its merits, this line of response underscores how far this conception of nirvāṇa is from any substantive positive nirvāṇa. Or, to put it differently, the Sautrāntika response rejects any notion of nirvāṇa that warrants its own ontology. It's not just that nirvāṇa is the non-arising of kleśa which, like empty pockets, has only as much of an ontology we are willing to ascribe to negations—since nirvāṇa is the non-arising of future suffering, it is on par with the fact that my pockets will not have money in them any time soon.

Where does this leave the "paradox of liberation"? Let us return to Chim's objection that an analytical cessation is conditioned (*mngon par 'dus byas pa*) by the path? What we find is that Chim uses the Sautrāntika denial of any positive substantial notion of nirvāṇa as a possible line of response:

> [Reply:] Even though the elimination by the path of the contaminated (*zag bcas*) object of elimination is called an 'effect which is a separation' (*bral ba = visaṃyoga*), its nature (*ngo bo*) is not newly made (*gsar du byas pa*). For the Vaibhāṣika assert that it is a permanent substance (*rtag pa'i rdzas*) and other schools (*sde pa gzhan*) say that it has no nature (*ngo bo nyid med pa*).[93]

In other words, even though it is true that the elimination of kleśa is called an "effect," it is not as if its nature is somehow newly produced by the path. Here, Chim first gestures towards a Sarvāstivādin response—that nirvāṇa is a permanent substance. But this leaves us with the all the same perplexing questions of how to explain the existence of this substance independently of the causal influence of the path. Chim then gives a seemingly more promising Sautrāntika response: ontologically speaking, nirvāṇa is not newly made because there is not *anything* that is nirvāṇa. In

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[92] Yaśomitrā glosses "more" (*anya*) as more dispositions or birth (SA, 254).

[93] *mchims mdzod*, 19: *de ni lam gyis spang bya zag bcas spangs pa la bral ba'i 'bras bu brjod kyi ngo bo gsar du byas pa ni ma yin te bye brag tu smra ba rtag pa'i rdzas su 'dod pa'i phyir dang / sde pa gzhan gyis ngo bo nyid med par smras pa'i phyir ro.*

contrast to ideas of a permanent substance, there is nothing more to nirvāṇa than getting rid of any neurotic tendencies or dispositions.

What are we to make of this solution to the paradox? Remember that the problem was that, since at point *a*, we are suffering but at point *b* we have eliminated suffering, we feel compelled to explain this achievement at point *b* causally. The Sautrāntika response to the dilemma is to say that, strictly speaking, there is no point *b*—or, to be precise, that we use the term "point *b*" as a way of talking about the absence of the suffering at point *a*. So construed there is indeed no person, state, or entity at point *b* to be conditioned.

For our purposes in this chapter, we don't need to settle whether this nominalist line of response resolves the paradox. On the one hand, if nirvāṇa is nothing but the elimination of kleśa, and the elimination of *kleśa* is accomplished through practice, insofar as it is anything at all, it would seem to have to be conditioned.[94] But, on the other hand, since we're not saying that there is something that is nirvāṇa, it is not clear that this sort of objection is at all meaningful. In either case, however, what we need to see is that this purely negative view of nirvāṇa faces more pressing problems.

How is this conception of nirvāṇa as a negation different from the annihilationism Buddhist philosopher have always been so worried about? Although Buddhist thinkers have, from the very beginning, taken pains to distance their view of the elimination of suffering from the flat out assertation that nirvāṇa is a form of nonexistence, a view they call "annihilationism" (*ucchedavāda*), it is not always clear why, nor should we think that their reasons were uniform.[95] For one thing, among early Buddhists, there may have been specific rhetorical reasons to distance

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[94] Note that this is precisely the objection that Buddhagoṣa levels against the claim that nirvāṇa is merely the elimination of attachment, hatred, and ignorance (Vism, 432).

[95] Gowans, *Philosophy of the Buddha*, 154.

themselves from this view that changed as Buddhist philosophers found themselves arguing with different opponents.[96]

Philosophically speaking, however, the problem with a purely negative conception of nirvāṇa is that solving the problem of suffering by denying that there is a point *b*, a state or condition beyond suffering, is a pyrrhic victory. What if point *b*, the "other shore" we talked about in the last chapter, was the goal of our practice? There is an easy intuition that the whole point was to be free from suffering, a point that I return to through Candrakīrti's lens in Chapter Four. To go back to an earlier example, if you kill someone to cure their cancer, you will have obviously missed the point. While at times this intuition appears faintly modern, we are going to see in subsequent chapters that part of Mahāyāna objections to this negative approach is that such a cure is of no benefit to anyone.

As we have now seen, the kernel of Vatsagotra's question was a doubt about what it means to get rid of suffering. If suffering is eliminated, what are we to make of that elimination or nirvāṇa? When we say that there is something, however ineffable, that is nirvāṇa, we end up paradoxically asserting that this unconditioned something is conditioned by the path. Or, even worse, we replace the unconditioned with just more conditioning and, therefore, more suffering. Then again, pushed by this paradox, if we assent that the nirvāṇa is simply the elimination of conditioning, with no one to gain by it, we seem to have forgotten the point of freedom, like the homicidal oncologist.

We already know that the Buddha refused to answer this question—asserting and denying the continuity of the Tathāgata after death were both bad options. We also know that the way to "answer" such questions is to let go of the premise that motivated the question. According to the way Vasubandhu taught us to think about these questions, the "answer" was to deny that there is

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[96] Sharf, "Is Nirvāṇa the Same as Insentience?: Chinese Struggles with an Indian Buddhist Ideal," 145.

a Self—this is what the Buddha's silence was supposed to point us to. What we've seen in this chapter, however, is that even if we jettison our assumptions of Self, we still aren't out of the woods. We are still stuck in Vatsagotra's dilemma—'is the elimination of suffering an annihilation or is there something there that continues?'

Nor is it just Vatsagotra and us who are stuck. What we are beginning to see is that, since Buddhist naturalists start from this same assumption that we are to get rid of suffering, the goal is the elimination of suffering, call it "nirvāṇa" or not. Given their commitment to naturalistic causal explanations, this goal must be identified with some sort of psychological state or capacity. The unconditioned is naturalized; the problem at the heart of the human conditioned is psychologized. As a way forward, the question to which we shall now turn is whether the Buddha's silence is pointing to a deeper assumption driving Vatsagotra's doubt.

III. Empty

If you had headed east from here, after passing as many hundreds of thousands of buddha realms as seventy-two times the number of grains of sand in the Ganges, you would have arrived at the buddha realm Pariśuddha, home of a truly extraordinary bodhisattva named "Brahmā."[1] As the discourse of the *Brahmaviśeṣacintiparipṛcchā* proceeds, eventually Shakyamuni recruits this other-worldly savant to come here to earth, a pure realm vastly superior to the heaven of Amitayus or any other Buddha field.[2] So it is that we eventually find Brahmā in Veṇuvana, somewhere on the outskirts of Rājagṛha, the capital of Magadha, explaining to another bodhisattva, Jālinīprabha, that the Buddha perceives neither saṃsāra nor nirvāṇa. Perhaps slightly taken aback, Jālinīprabha asks: "But do the blessed ones not teach the Dharma so that beings may pass beyond saṃsāra?"[3] Or, in other words, if there is no nirvāṇa, no elimination of suffering, what are we doing here?

As you will recall from the Introduction, what we're interested in is whether the problem of suffering is to be solved by realizing there is no suffering. On our way towards grappling with this larger question, in this chapter, our focus will be on the idea that freedom from suffering is found within the emptiness of our experience. Since, in the language of Mahāyāna texts, the way this is

[1] *Brahmaviśeṣacintiparipṛcchā Sūtra* (BV) F.26a. The BV is most likely a relatively early Mahāyāna Sūtra which, as we shall see, served as a reference point for later Indian Mādhyamikas (PsP, 540; Li, "The Reliance on Scripture and Vicissitudes of Textual Practices in Madhyamaka Thought," 561; Dharmachakra Translation Committee, *The Questions of Brahma-viśeṣacintin*, i.2).

[2] BV F.24a. Satō, "Some Aspects of the Cult of Akṣobhya in Mahayana Scriptures"; Satō, "Entering Parinirvana in Akṣobhya's Buddha-Field"; Nattier, "The Realm of Akṣobhya: A Missing Piece in the History of Pure Land Buddhism"; Nattier, "The Indian Roots of Pure Land Buddhism: Insights from the Oldest Chinese Versions of the *Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha*"; McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 159; Halkias and Payne, *Pure Lands in Asian Texts and Contexts: An Anthology*.

[3] BV F.33a: *bcom ldan 'das kyis 'khor ba las bzla ba'i phyir chos ma bshad dam.*

put is that emptiness is nirvāṇa, listening to what this alien has to say about the Buddha perceiving neither saṃsāra nor nirvāṇa will serve our purposes well. We're eventually going to use Madhyamaka texts to put a finer point on what he says, so we shall proceed as follows: First, we will continue hearing the Bodhisattva Brahmā out, attending closely to what he is saying. Second, we will pause our soteriological pursuits long enough to make the basic contours of Madhyamaka intelligible and my own take on it transparent. With these preliminaries behind us, for the remainder of the chapter we will use this Madhyamaka perspective to consider why emptiness is nirvāṇa.

So, returning to the dialogue, Brahmā responds to Jālinīprabha that even though the Buddha neither eliminates saṃsāra nor brings about nirvāṇa, he does teach a nirvāṇa which is liberation from the discrimination (*'du shes ≈ saṃjñā*) between saṃsāra and nirvāṇa.[4] We will eventually come back to this bit of equivocation but, before that, let us see what happens when the Buddha joins their conversation. Lauding Brahma for a point well made, the Buddha reiterates that there is no saṃsāra to be freed from, no nirvāṇa to attain.[5] Now that the Buddha has let the cat out of the bag, however, five hundred monks who were listening in on the conversation get up on the spot, objecting that if there is no saṃsāra to be trapped in, no nirvāṇa to be attained, their practice of celibacy (*tshangs par spyod pa la gnas pa*) is pointless (*don med*), their meditation and concentration (*bsam gtan*) unnecessary.[6] If we allow ourselves to imaginatively read between the lines for a moment, how shall we imagine their demeanor? Horror? Shock? Fury?

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[4] BV F.33a.

[5] Italics added. *Brahmaviśeṣacintiparipṛcchā*, F.33a: *tshangs pa ngas 'khor ba dang mya ngan las 'das pa ma dmigs so/ de ci'i phyir zhe na/ de bzhin gshegs pa 'khor bar 'dogs kyang 'di la gang yang 'khor ba med do/ /mya ngan las 'das par ston kyang 'di la gang yang yongs su mya ngan las mi 'da'o/ /tshangs pa gang rnams tshul 'di la zhugs pa de dag ni 'khor ba'i chos can yang ma yin/ yongs su mya ngan las 'das pa'i chos can yang ma yin no.* Translated by Dharmachakra Translation Committee, *The Questions of Brahma-viśeṣacintin*, 1.85.

[6] BV, F.33b.

Eventually the bodhisattva Brahmā manages to bring the monks back into the fold by likening nirvāṇa to space (*ākāśa*), a concept, already encountered in the Kośa, that we will continue to return to over the course of the next several chapters:

> Even though they function within nirvāṇa, they cannot see it, cannot understand it. Why not? Noble son, because nirvāṇa is just a name. Just as we can utter the word "space," and yet there is nothing to take hold of, so we can utter "nirvāṇa, nirvāṇa," and yet there is nothing to take hold of.[7]

Upon hearing these words, the five-hundred monks are liberated (*rnam par grol = vimukta*).[8] Having now completely come around to this elusive and novel concept of nirvāṇa, the dialogue closes with their affirmation that one who seeks a real (*dngos por tshol ba*) nirvāṇa in the hopes of transcending saṃsāra will never become a Buddha.[9]

What emerges so brilliantly here in the BV is in fact a recurring theme throughout Mahāyāna discussions of nirvāṇa: at least at some, yet to be delineated level, in some, yet to be defined sense, there is no suffering or saṃsāra to get rid of, no elimination of suffering or nirvāṇa to attain. Furthermore, and most importantly, the dialogue shows how understanding this point can be both disorienting *and* liberating. Or, to put it even more paradoxically, the realization that there is no saṃsāra or nirvāṇa is nirvāṇa.

While Mahāyāna Sūtras are saturated with variations on this theme, reflecting on this goal-less goal comes to have particular importance for the soteriology of Nāgārjuna (c.a. 150-200 C.E.) and

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[7] BV, F.34a: *mya ngan las 'das pa de nyid la rnam par spyod kyang de mi mthong khong du mi chud do// de ci'i phyir zhe na/ rigs kyi bu gang mya ngan las 'das pa zhes bya ba de ni ming tsam mo/ /ji ltar nam mkha' nam mkha' zhes brjod kyang gzung du med pa de bzhin du mya ngan las 'das pa mya ngan las 'das pa zhes brjod pa yang gzung du med pa'o/ /* Translation by Dharmachakra Translation Committee, *The Questions of Brahma-viśeṣacintin*, 1.90. (Note that I have edited the translation to remove an extraneous "can" from the second to last line.)

[8] In contrast to Brahmā's equivocation between seemingly two senses of nirvāṇa, the nirvāṇa to be transcended and the nirvāṇa that transcends nirvāṇa, at this point the Sūtra studiously avoids the term, instead using "*rnam par grol*" or "*vimukta*" (BV F.34a). It is unclear how much, if anything, is to be read into this.

[9] BV, F.34a.

the Mādhyamikas who followed him.[10] There is a sense in which philosophers in the other Mahāyāna school of philosophy, Yogācāra, seemed to walk back from this precipice, although this isn't to say that they did not reflect on this goal-less goal with extraordinary subtlety. [11] Asanga, for example, interprets the claim that the Tathagata doesn't see saṃsāra and nirvāṇa to mean they are both permutations of the mind, a point I will return to in Chapter 5.[12] Nāgārjuna and many

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[10] Walser, *Nāgārjuna in Context: Mahāyāna Buddhism and Early Indian Culture*, 59–88 The dates here are from Hirakawa and Ruegg (*A History of Indian Buddhism: From Śākyamuni to Early Mahāyāna*, 242; *The Buddhist Philosophy of the Middle: Essays on Indian and Tibetan Madhyamaka*, 16).

[11] To see this point, it is worth comparing how Brahmā's claims are absorbed into these respective traditions. Asanga, the purported "founder" of Yogācāra, asks:

> 'What did the Bhagavan have in mind in the *Brahmaviśeṣacintiparipṛcchā* when he taught that the Tathāgata perceives neither saṃsāra nor nirvāṇa?'
>
> What he had in mind when he taught this was that, since the *other-powered* (*paratantra*) is itself the *imputed* (*parikalpita*) and the *perfected* (*pariniṣpanna*), there is no distinction between saṃsāra and nirvāṇa.
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> (MSG(L), 39: *bcom ldan 'das kyis ci las dgongs te / tshangs pas zhus pa las de bzhin gshegs pas 'khor ba yang mi dmigs / mya ngan las 'das pa yang mi dmigs zhes bstan zhe na / gzhan gyi dbang gi ngo bo nyid kun tu brtags pa dang / yongs su grub pa'i ngo bo nyid yin pa'i phyir 'khor ba dang mya ngan las 'das pa nyid bye brag med pa la dgongs nas bstan te.*)

In contrast, Candrakīrti, our Mādhyamika of choice for this chapter, closes his discussion of nirvāṇa with Brahmā's words:

> Blessed One, there is no transcending saṃsāra for those who seek (*bhāvataḥ*) nirvāṇa as existing. What is the reason for that? So called "nirvāṇa" is the calming of all reference, the cessation of all mental activity. Blessed One, it is those ignorant people who, having entered the dharma training, so excellently taught, that have fallen into the view of the Tīrthikas who then seek an existing (*bhāvataḥ*) nirvāṇa as if extracting oil from sesame seeds or ghee from milk. Blessed One, I say that those who seek nirvāṇa among all things which are themselves completely ceased are arrogant Tīrthikas. Blessed One, one who correctly undertakes yogic practice do not give rise to or negate any dharma, nor do they desire to attain or realize any dharma.
>
> (PsP, 540-41: *na teṣāṃ bhagavan saṃsārasamatikramo ye nirvāṇaṃ bhāvataḥ paryeṣante / tat kasya hetoḥ? nirvāṇam iti bhagavan yaḥ praśamaḥ sarvanimittānām uparatiḥ sarveñjitasamiñjitānām / tadime bhagavan mohapuruṣā ye svākhyāte dharmavinaye pravrajya tīrthikadṛṣṭau nipatitā nirvāṇaṃ bhāvataḥ paryeṣante tadyathā tilebhyastailaṃ kṣīrātsarpiḥ / atyantaparinirvṛteṣu bhagavan sarvadharmeṣu ye nirvāṇaṃ mārganti tānahamābhimānikān tīrthikāniti vadāmi / na bhagavan yogācāraḥ samyak pratipannaḥ kasyaciddharmasyotpādaṃ vā nirodhaṃ vā karoti, nāpi kasyaciddharmasya prāptimicchati nābhisamayam.*)

For a general discussion of the three natures, see Gold, *Paving the Great Way: Vasubandhu's Unifying Buddhist Philosophy*, 148 ff. For discussions of the soteriological tensions and overlaps between Yogācāra and Madhyamaka, see Gold, "Without Karma and Nirvāṇa, Buddhism Is Nihilism" but also Choong, "Nirvāṇa and Tathatā in the Early Yogācāra Texts: The Bodhisattva's Adaptation of the Śrāvaka-Path"; Sponberg, "Dynamic Liberation in Yogācāra Buddhism," 59.

[12] Ibid, (MSG(L), 39.

later Mādhyamikas, in contrast, point to the freedom to be found at this precipice, just on the verge of negating the purpose of the Buddhist path. It is of their texts that we shall inquire into the philosophical and soteriological significance of this empty goal. In order to grapple with what Mādhyamikas mean when they say that the way out of suffering is to realize there is no suffering, we will need to ask in what sense is there no nirvāṇa? In what sense is the absence of nirvāṇa actually nirvāṇa? And, most importantly, why?

1. The Middle Way

Madhyamaka is supposed to be the "Middle Way" (*madhyamā pratipat*) between various metaphysical extremes, eternalism (*śāśvatānta*) and nihilism (*ucchedāntā*) most of all.[13] Answering our questions will require that we too try to make our way between these extremes. Since, as the Tibetan commentator Gorampa would point out much later, every Buddhist philosopher thinks their middle way is *the* Middle Way, there is no uncontroversial place to begin. Instead, let us start right in the thick of it with the Indian Mādhyamika, Candrakīrti (c. 600 – c. 650), whom I briefly introduced in Chapter One. Although his influence was slow to be felt, evidently having escaped immediate notoriety, in hindsight, Candrakīrti appears to have inspired more philosophical attention and generated more controversy than any Mādhyamika after Nāgārjuna himself.[14] Like other Mādhyamikas before and after him, Candrakīrti seeks to show

[13] MMK 18.10, 24.18. Just what the "middle" is between is a moving target. Among other things, Candrakīrti and other Mādhyamikas will also gloss this as the middle between the extremes of existence and nonexistence (*bhāva abhāva*) (PsP, 504).

[14] Particularly when viewed through the lens of Tibetan intellectual history. Although figures like Bhāviveka and Śāntarakṣita had a more substantive influence on Indian thought, Candrakīrti's influence dominated later Tibetan Madhyamaka, not to mention the contemporary academic study of Madhyamaka (Vose, *Resurrecting Candrakīrti: Disputes in the Tibetan Creation of Prasāṇgika*, 17; Dunne, "Thoughtless Buddha, Passionate Buddha," 540; Hayes, "Nāgārjuna's Appeal," 300; Walser, *Nāgārjuna in Context: Mahāyāna Buddhism and Early Indian Culture*, 1; MacDonald, *In Clear Words*, 1:5).

that the emptiness of all things is a middle way between the wrong sort of assertions and the wrong sort of negations.

The key to getting a grip on what emptiness means is to understand its purpose.[15] It is only when we've come to fully appreciate *why* Mādhyamikas are talking about emptiness that we can begin to understand *what* they are saying. As such, looking at emptiness through a soteriological lens is, in fact, best practice for interpreting Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti's admittedly obstruse philosophizing. To ask, after the fact, how one's interpretation makes sense within a Buddhist soteriological framework is to ask too little too late—our interpretation of emptiness must emerge as an answer or solution to what Mādhyamikas see as our most basic problem.[16]

1.1. Svabhāva

So it is that to start we must ask what Mādhyamikas diagnose as the true cause of suffering. We will eventually get to how, and at what level of analysis, Mādhyamikas deny that there even is any suffering but, for the moment, let us follow the etiologies of suffering as we find them in Madhyamaka texts. Like other Buddhists, Mādhyamikas think *kleśa* and karma are immediately responsible for our saṃsāric suffering;[17] and, also like other Buddhists, they maintain that kleśa

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[15] This seems to be part of Nāgārjuna's point in 24.7:

> [Reply:] Here we say that you do not understand the point of [teaching] emptiness, emptiness itself, and the meaning of emptiness; in this way you are thus frustrated (trans. Siderits and Katsura, *Nāgārjuna's Middle Way:* Mulamadhyamakakārikā, 271) (*atra brūmaḥ śūnyatāyāṃ na tvaṃ vetsi prayojanam / śūnyatāṃ śūnyatārthaṃ ca tata evaṃ vihanyase*).

[16] Cf. Siderits, "On the Soteriological Significance of Emptiness," 15.

[17] MMK 18.5: Liberation comes from the elimination of karma and *kleśa* (*karmakleśakṣayān mokṣaḥ*).

PrPr, F.185a: Since karma and *kleśa* are the cause of birth, the release from suffering due to their elimination is liberation (*las dang nyon mongs pa dag ni skye ba'i rgyu yin pa'i phyir/ de dag zad pas sdug bsngal las rnam par grol ba ba ni thar pa'o*).

PsP, 350: When one has eliminated appropriation, there is no more samsaric existence, which has appropriation as its causal condition (*upādāne hi kṣīṇe tatpratyayo bhavo na bhavati*).

and karma arise from our misperception of a Self.[18] But, not content to leave it there, for many Buddhist philosophers, Mādhyamikas included, truly uprooting the causes of suffering requires going a step further. Their intuition was that there was a further, subtler, sort of ignorance motivating the misprision of personal identity. Their question is 'what is behind this grasping on to the Self'?

Mādhyamikas tell us the problem is belief in a *svabhāva*, which literally means having one's own *bhāva* or existence and, therefore, is sometimes translated as "inherent existence" or "own-being."[19] Let us take *svabhāva* to mean what something *really* is. The Mādhyamika's claim to fame is that they deny that anything has a *svabhāva*, in this sense.[20] Speaking counterfactually, since a *svabhāva* is what something is found to be upon analysis, we can think of it in terms of being an analytic or "findable identity."[21]

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[18] This is probably nowhere better said than in Candrakīrti's famous verse, much loved by Tibetan commentators, which begins:

> Seeing through [his] intellect that all *kleśa* and faults, without exception, arise from the belief the transitory constituents are a self… (MA 6.120: *satkāyadṛṣṭiprabhavān aśeṣān/ kleśāṃś ca doṣāṃś ca dhiyā vipaśyan*).

See also *ngan gsal*, 398 ff.; *dgong pa rab bsal*, 442 ff. See also PsP, 340.

[19] Westerhoff, *Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka: A Philosophical Introduction*, 19; Tillemans, *How Do Madhyamikas Think?: And Other Essays on the Buddhist Philosophy of the Middle*, 22 ff. For discussions of the problems of translating "*svabhāva*" see Siderits, "Causation and Emptiness in Early Madhyamaka," 395; Westerhoff, *Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka: A Philosophical Introduction*, 20 & 24 fn.22.

[20] Candrakīrti argues at length, however, that emptiness is the *svabhāva* of all things (MAB(LVP), 305 ff.). Although he can be read as equivocating between two meanings of the term, what Westerhoff distinguishes as a "*substance svabhāva*" and "*absolute svabhāva*," we can also read him as saying that dependently arisen things lack a s*vabhāva* but that emptiness is a *svabhāva*, in the sense that it is unfabricated and not dependent on anything else (Westerhoff, *Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka: A Philosophical Introduction*, 40 ff). This latter interpretation is plausible to the extent that we think emptiness is not dependent, in virtue of not being anything at all.

[21] Tillemans, *How Do Madhyamikas Think?: And Other Essays on the Buddhist Philosophy of the Middle*, 23. Putting it this way is particularly characteristic of Candrakīrti and later Mādhyamikas. Even though this is not how Nāgārjuna describes it, as Tillemans has argued so persuasively, understanding the Mādhyamika's target along these lines is crucial to making sense of their arguments (Tillemans, 23 ff.; Westerhoff, *Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka: A Philosophical Introduction*, 25–26).

As we can see, analysis becomes the critical term for fleshing out what would constitute a *svabhāva*. While Mādhyamikas gradually developed a diverse and increasingly systematic arsenal of analyses, to understand what is at stake in this talk of a *svabhāva*, we need to see the overarching intuition at play: Pick up the book in front of you and tell me what it is. To say that it is 'just a book' is to tell me nothing at all. Perhaps you will tell me something about pages and words but then where does that end? Within pages you find ink, cellulose fibers, and so on, *ad infinitum.* What we find is that when try to pin down the identity of one thing, that identity appears to be borrowed from something else. Strictly speaking, it would seem, a book isn't a book, it is pages, pages aren't pages, they are paper and words. When we look for one thing, what we find is something else. Everything, it turns out, depends on something else for its identity.

Now, speaking hypothetically, imagine that you did find something that didn't disappear when you asked these questions. Imagine that you could specify what at least one thing is without recourse to some other thing. The level at which you find this something does not matter—maybe you are able to point to a whole that really is the book (not the pages, ink, and so forth) or maybe, like many atomically inclined Indian philosophers, you point to some basic ultimate constituent of the book.[22] Either way, that something is what is meant by *svabhāva*. The core idea here is that for any *x*, if the identify of *x* can be specified without recourse to some non-*x*, that would constitute the *svabhāva* of *x*.

What this makes clear is that for something to have a *svabhāva* or findable identity it would have to be independent; and only something independent could have such an identity. While Mādhyamikas identify many types of dependence, for present purposes, we can continue to focus on the dependence of a whole on its parts or *mereological dependence*. For a whole to be findable

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[22] Siderits, "Causation and Emptiness in Early Madhyamaka," 395.

in this sense, it would have to be conceptually independent of its parts.[23] Or, in other words, it would have to be specifiable without recourse to its parts. In the process of answering what *x* really is, if we end up talking about the parts of *x*, our attempt to point to *x* has led us to pointing to non-*x*. It is for this reason that Mādhyamikas claim that, to have a findable identity, *x* would have to have an identity independent of its parts. It is the fact that *x* does not have such an identity independent of its parts that accounts for our inability, upon analysis, to specify the identity of *x*. So it is that, crucially, no matter what spin you put on it, to find something upon analysis is to find something that does not depend on something else for its identity.[24]

Indian philosophers and, most relevantly, Abhidharma thinkers believed that the fundamental constituents of reality must have a *svabhāva*.[25] Motivated by their view that belief in a Self was the problem, Abhidharma thinkers strove to show that, since persons could be reduced to more basic constituents, persons, selves, and, indeed, any kind of personal identify was an unreal fiction. Persons are not the only thing that is vulnerable to this sort of reductive analysis, leading Abhidharma theorists to conclude that all partite wholes were unreal. But, then, where to stop? Since anything partite could be subject to further reduction, their own reductive analysis pushed Abhidharma thinkers to confront the possibility that nothing exists. In order to avoid this sort of

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[23] See also Westerhoff's distinction between "existential" and "notional" dependence (*Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka: A Philosophical Introduction*, 26).

[24] Significantly, it is *svabhāva* in this sense of independence that figures most explicitly in Nāgārjuna's thought:

> For a *svabhāva* is not artificially created nor dependent on something else.
> (MMK 15.2: *akṛtrimaḥ svabhāvo hi nirapekṣaḥ paratra ca.*)

For an alternative translation, see Siderits and Katsura, *Nāgārjuna's Middle Way:* Mulamadhyamakakārikā, 155.
I here defer to Tillemans' in-depth reflection on how these two senses of *svabhāva*—findability and independence—in fact seem to come together in Nāgārjuna's thought Tillemans, *How Do Mādhyamikas Think?*, 23). Westerhoff has also made the same point, whereas Hayes has argued that Nāgārjuna fallaciously equivocated between these two senses of *svabhāva* (Westerhoff, *Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka: A Philosophical Introduction*, 26; Hayes, "Nāgārjuna's Appeal," 311).

[25] Salvini, "Dependent Arising, Non-Arising, and the Mind: MMK1 and the Abhidharma"; Walser, *Nāgārjuna in Context: Mahāyāna Buddhism and Early Indian Culture*, 209 ff.

nihilistic conclusion, they argued that underlying these conceptual fictions (*prajñaptisat*) of our everyday world, there were irreducible entities or "*dharmas.*" Unlike partite wholes, they argued, these *dharmas* could not be reduced to something more basic, since they had their own nature or *svabhāva*.[26]

A distinctive feature of Candrakīrti's thought is that he saw that this slippery slope runs in the other direction as well—with dire soteriological consequences. Just as, if complex objects lack a *svabhāva*, it seems like even the most basic things would too; if the most basic components of things must have a *svabhāva* or independent identity, aggregated wholes must have such an independent identity as well. And, if our bodies, feelings, and conceptual capacities each have their own *svabhāva*, then the aggregates taken collectively must also have an independent identity. But, crucially, thinking of our aggregates as if they possessed such an identity is just another way of holding onto a Self.[27]

1.2. Emptiness

Emptiness (*śūnyatā*) is the lack of any such *svabhāva.* The Madhyamaka proposition that 'all things (*dharma*) are empty' is a metaphysical claim that for any *x*, where *x* is causally or

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[26] Though Mādhyamikas may have saddled their Abhidharma opponent's with an even stronger view of *svabhāva* than their texts suggest, it is clear enough that this Abhidharma *svabhāva* is the target of their critique (Siderits, "Causation and Emptiness in Early Madhyamaka," 394 ff.; Williams, "Some Aspects of Language and Construction in Madhyamaka," 5; Siderits, *Buddhism as Philosophy*, Ch.6). Westerhoff has argued that since the Abhidharmikas allowed that something with a *svabhāva* still could depend on causes, the notion of *svabhāva* Mādhyamikas critiqued was stronger than what we find in the Abhidharma literature (Westerhoff, *Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka: A Philosophical Introduction*, 25). For the question of whether this move was justified or a unfair strawman tactic, see Robinson, "Did Nāgārjuna Really Refute All Philosophical Views?"; and for a response see Tillemans, *How Do Madhyamikas Think?: And Other Essays on the Buddhist Philosophy of the Middle*, 19 ff.

[27] This is one way of understanding Candrakīrti's argument for why *Śrāvakas* must realize the emptiness of *svabhāva.* To wit, if they think the sub-components of the Self have a *svabhāv*a, despite themselves they're going to end up seeking a *svabhāva* or Self of the aggregates (MAB(X), 14). As Tibetan disagreements over this point make clear, however, its interpretation is contentious (*dgongs pa rab gsal*, 54 ff.; *ngan sel*, 307 ff.). See also Westerhoff, *Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka: A Philosophical Introduction*, Ch.7; Westerhoff, *Candrakīrti's Introduction to the Middle Way: A Guide*, 32.

mereologically dependent on some non-*x*, *x* is without independent or findable identity.[28] As this way of putting it suggests, the Mādhyamikas' rationale for this claim is that all things are dependent on something else. While this dependence can be understood as causal (*x* depends on a cause which is -*x*), as well as conceptual (*x* depends on the concept 'x' which is, again, -*x*), in keeping with the mereological approach I have been following here, the point is that *x* is dependent on its -*x* parts.[29] Since a *svabhāva* would require that *x* had an independent findable identity, whereas, in fact, x "borrows" its identity from its parts, it follows that *x* is empty of, or without, any *svabhāva.*

Setting aside all of the objections and counterarguments to what I've said, which we must if we are ever to get where we are going, let us look at what understanding emptiness is supposed to

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[28] This does not exhaust the possible forms of dependence *x* may have on -*x* (Westerhoff, *Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka: A Philosophical Introduction*, 27). Siderits and Garfield have challenged the view that this claim should be understood metaphysically, arguing instead for a "semantic interpretation" (Siderits, "Thinking on Empty: Madhyamaka Anti-Realism and Canons of Indian Philosophy"; Ferraro, "A Criticism of M. Siderits and J. L. Garfield's 'Semantic Interpretation' of Nāgārjuna's Theory of Two Truths"; Siderits and Garfield, "Defending the Semantic Interpretation: A Reply to Ferraro"; Garfield, "Taking Conventional Truth Seriously," 37; Arnold, *Buddhists, Brahmins, and Belief: Epistemology in South Asian Philosophy of Religion*, 172; Siderits, *Buddhism as Philosophy*, 182). Whether their reading is plausible largely comes down to whether one is convinced that we must avoid the alternatives that comes with taking this claim metaphysically, what they call the "metaphysical interpretation" and "nihilism" (Siderits, 181).While there is enough independent textual evidence to set aside the former, to show that any version of the latter is as philosophically bankrupt as they claim would require a far stronger argument than is available (Siderits, 107). Particularly, since the point here is that we cannot charitably attribute such an unreasonable position to a philosopher of Nāgārjuna's stature, over and beyond poking holes in the nihilist's position, one would need to show that there is no version of the nihilistic position that any rational person in any historical epoch could plausibly have accepted (Siderits and Garfield, "Defending the Semantic Interpretation: A Reply to Ferraro," 663). That's a high bar.

Indeed, to see why Candrakīrti's view may not be that far from nihilism, consider how he responds to the charge that his view is no different from that of the *nāstika* who denies rebirth (PsP, 368). Here he explains that the difference between his view and nihilism is the difference between two people who both accuse a third man of theft: the first makes his accusation of theft out of animosity, the second because he saw the thief in the act. Even though there is no difference in the actual content of their accusations, there is, nevertheless a substantive difference between the two positions. So too, Candrakīrti argues, even though the Mādhyamika and the nihilist both deny that, in reality, there is karma, rebirth etc, unlike the *nāstika*, the Mādhyamika does so by reason of dependent arising (PsP, 368). (For discussions of the thief analogy, see Westerhoff, "On the Nihilist Interpretation of Madhyamaka," 351; Matilal, "A Critique of the Mādhyamika Position," 54). Westerhoff has also offered a plausible argument for why at least some version of the nihilistic interpretation has philosophical merits (Westerhoff, "On the Nihilist Interpretation of Madhyamaka").

[29] Westerhoff, *Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka: A Philosophical Introduction*, 26ff. & 36ff.

do. The way to stop believing in a *svabhāva* is to see that there is no such thing. If you're afraid of the monster under you bed, neither trying to ignore it nor relaxation techniques are going to help. When you look under the bed and see that there is nothing there, on the other hand, neurosis and dimwittedness aside, you will eventually stop worrying about it. Likewise, when you find that there is nothing that has an independent identity, that all things are empty of *svabhāva*, with practice you will eventually stop believing and acting as if they did.

The point here is that, through Mādhyamika eyes, every time we get tripped up, the culprit is always our belief in a *svabhāva*, no matter how reflexive and unconscious it might be. Instead of a book, think of someone you hate, someone who has done you wrong—what Buddhist texts like to call your "enemy" (*śatru*).[30] Now, ask what it is that you hate. What do you find? Actions? "He hit me below the belt" (literally or figuratively), "She stabbed me in the back" (hopefully figuratively). Intentions? "He's selfish," "she's cruel." No matter how saturated your foe may be with their evil designs, these intentions do not add up to the object of your hatred—intentions aren't persons. Nor are actions. In a way that is odd and emotionally counter-intuitive, your enemy is something other than your enemy.[31] Your enemy is empty of being your enemy. As with enemies, so too with friends, lovers, loss and gain—seeing their lack of independent identity short circuits our desire, aversion, and jealousy, insofar as the object of these emotions disappears upon analysis.

To be clear, the way I am telling it, the experience of emptiness is of paramount importance for liberation.[32] According to Candrakīrti, in the more precise language of Buddhist scholasticism,

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[30] See, for example, BK i, 198.

[31] BCA 6.41-43.

[32] For arguments against this claim, see Siderits, "On the Soteriological Significance of Emptiness"; Burton, "Knowledge and Liberation: Philosophical Ruminations on a Buddhist Conundrum," 335 ff.

setting aside all talk of the Buddha's Awakening, perceiving emptiness is needed to get rid of kleśa, the job-description of so-called *śrāvakas*.[33] As interpreters, if we fail to see how grasping a *svabhāva* is the source of suffering, along the lines that I am hashing out, the role emptiness plays in liberation from suffering will seem "ancillary."[34] In contrast, according to what Candrakīrti is telling us, realizing emptiness is necessary for liberation because holding onto a *svabhāva* is what drives us to want, hate, and believe in our own autonomy.

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[33] As you will recall from Chapter One §1.4, "*Śrāvaka*" is a Buddhist term of art, in this context distinguishing practitioners whose aim is only the elimination of *kleśa*, as opposed to Bodhisattvas who seek to also eliminate "obscurations to knowledge" (*jñeyāvaraṇa*) (Apple, "Twenty Varieties of the Saṃgha: A Typology of Noble Beings (Ārya) in Indo-Tibetan Scholasticism (Part I)," 519).

Candrakīrti's claim was not uncontroversial. Indeed, his arguments for why ś*rāvakas* need to realize emptiness are aimed at his rival and predecessor, Bhāviveka, who seems to have thought otherwise (PsP 351; PrPr, 183b). (Note that MAB(X), 12 should also be read in this light).

[34] With characteristic lucidity, Mark Siderits claims that emptiness is ancillary to freeing oneself from suffering:

> What I shall claim is first that the role emptiness plays in liberation from suffering is ancillary in nature; it is the doctrine of non-self that continues to play the chief role in that project, while emptiness serves just to correct for certain common errors in the application of non-self. Second, I shall claim that the doctrine of emptiness is intended to prevent a subtle form of clinging that may grow out of one's appreciation of the doctrine of non-self, and may thus prove an impediment to complete liberation (Siderits, "On the Soteriological Significance of Emptiness," 15).

A great deal is at stake here for Siderits and other proponents of the "semantic interpretation." Since emptiness, interpreted according to the semantic interpretation, does not play a central role in liberation or enlightenment, it is incumbent upon Siderits to show that it does not need to (Siderits, 17).

There is no need to take issue with a weaker version of Siderits' second claim. *Among other things*, in Madhyamaka texts, emptiness does appear to counteract the notion that selflessness is the ultimate truth in some objectionable sense (consider, for example, MMK 18.6; PsP, 358: *evaṃ tatpratipakṣabhūtam api anātmadarśanaṃ naiva tattvam iti*).

As will become increasingly clear as we delve more deeply into Candrakīrti's soteriology, however, there is something quite wrong about his first claim that realizing selflessness—not emptiness—is what removes our suffering. Candrakīrti could not be clearer on this point. As he puts it in the PsP passages I shall quote a bit further along (PsP, 351), since fabrication and concepts inevitably lead to suffering, emptiness is necessary; and, as he puts it in the MAB:

> [Someone who has not realized that all things lack essence] would not understand the selflessness of the person since they would observe (*upalaṃbha*) the aggregates which are the basis (*upādāna*) for imputing the Self. (MABh(X), 14: *pudgalanairātmyabodho 'pi na bhavati, ātmaprajñaptihetuskandhāvalambanāt*.)

Likewise, in his commentary to MMK 26.11 (PsP, 559), Candrakīrti argues that seeing emptiness is what cuts ignorance, the first of the twelve-links. The upshot of this is that the soteriological role of emptiness is far from ancillary, particularly for Candrakīrti (as opposed to Bhāviveka).

1.3. Concepts

Now, this relatively tidy and not horribly controversial picture falls apart when we start asking whether part of the problem may be concepts themselves.[35] In Candrakīrti's writings, concepts come under fire from two directions—first, as I shall explain momentarily, there is a way in which his critique of *svabhāva* bleeds into a more general critique of concepts. Second, following in Nāgārjuna's footsteps, Candrakīrti tells us again and again that we must also go beyond the antithesis of *svabhāva*—thinking that all things are empty is also a mistake. Answering whether thinking itself is the problem marks the point where interpretations of Candrakīrti—both Tibetan and academic—begin to sharply diverge.

Let us start with the first question of just to what extent belief in *svabhāva* pervades our concepts more generally. Is grasping onto a *svabhāva* an Indian disease, or do we all have it? And, if we all have it, do we have it all the time? Do all our thoughts, in fact, grasp on to the independent identity of our conceptual referents? Right now, is your understanding of what you are reading only possible because you taking "reading" as if it referred to some sort of discrete identifiable activity?

To start with, let's rule out the possibility that believing in a *svabhāva* is simply a product of adhering to Abhidharma ontologies or of a certain kind of philosophizing. To put it simply, since believing what you read in Abhidharma texts can't be the cause of all human suffering, there must

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[35] While the English term "concept" can refer to an abstraction, as when we say that there is something flawed about the concept *x*, *y*, or *z,* it can also refer to a mental event akin to a thought. It is in this latter sense that I shall be using the term to translate both *vikalpa* and *kalpanā*. Although we would have to turn to Dharmakīrti if we wanted someone to spell out just how these terms are psychological categories, Candrakīrti's usage of the terms make it clear he is talk about an intentional mental event capable of having an object (*viṣaya*) (PsP, 351).

For discussions of how concepts are part of the problem, according to Buddhist analyses, see Gomez, "Proto-Mādhyamika in the Pāli Canon," 142; Dunne, "Thoughtless Buddha, Passionate Buddha," 533; D'Amato, "Why the Buddha Never Uttered a Word," 42; Siderits, "The *Prapañca* Paradox," 646 & fn.3; Eltschinger, "Ignorance, Epistemology and Soteriology Part I," 50; Sponberg, "Dynamic Liberation in Yogācāra Buddhism," 51.

be some other more pervasive level of belief in a *svabhāva*.[36] Bearing this point in mind is all the more important in light of the tendency in contemporary philosophical discussions to treat ignorance as a philosophical misunderstanding, whether that is fleshed out in terms of realism, foundationalism, or metaphysics more generally. To see ignorance as the product of bad philosophizing would be a mistake, for precisely the reason I am pointing to—for Candrakīrti, grasping at a *svabhāva* is the cause of suffering and the first of the twelve-dependent links. Were suffering remotely tied to even the most rudimentary philosophical reflection, setting aside the unlimited joys we would expect of the animal kingdom, we would find ourselves in a far happier world.[37]

Now, granting that we have a natural tendency to grasp at *svabhāva*, regardless of any philosophical training, the question becomes whether this natural or innate (*sahaja*) grasping

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[36] Westerhoff discusses this more pervasive belief in terms of the "cognitive dimension" of *svabhāva* (*Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka: A Philosophical Introduction*, 46 ff.; "The Madhyamaka Concept of Svabhāva: Ontological and Cognitive Aspects") but see also Garfield, *Engaging Buddhism: Why It Matters to Philosophy*, 9.

Candrakīrti, in particular, again and again equates both delusion (*moha*) and ignorance (*avidyā*) (the cause of samsaric suffering) with belief in a *svabhāva* (MA 6.28; and MAB(LVP), 107). Likewise, commenting on a verse in the *Śūnyatāsaptati* (vs.64) where Nāgārjuna states that the twelve-dependent links arise from the ignorance grasping onto *bhāva* (*dngos po*), Candrakīrti, in his ŚSV writes:

> Things (*dngos po ≈ bhāva*) arisen from causes and conditions do not essentially (*ngo bo nyid*) arise. The conception (*rtog pa ≈ kalpanā*) of them as having a *svabhāva* is what the Bhagavan called "ignorance" (*ma rig pa ≈ avidyā*). It is said that ignorance (*ma rig pa ≈ avidyā*) is the incomprehension (*ma rtogs pa*) due to the failure to comprehend (*ma rtogs pa*) that there is no nature (*svabhāva*) that accords with the way things actually are.
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> (ŚSV, 329b: *rgyu dang rkyen las skyes pa'i dngos po ngo bo nyid kyis ma skyes ba la / de dag la gang zhig rang bzhin du rtog pa de la ma rig par bcom ldan 'das kyis gsungs la/ yang dag pa ji lta bar gnas pa'i rang bzhin med pa ma rtogs pa'i phyir / ma rtogs pa la ma rig pa zhes brjod do.*)

Note that in the Tibetan text I provide here, in the last line, I have amended *ma rtogs pa la<u>s</u>* to *ma rtogs pa la*. A choice also reflected in translation above.

[37] *gser phreng ii, 970*; *rol mtsho kha*, 316 ff.; *phar phyin spyi don*, 483. In a way that is vaguely reminiscent of Western debates around nature versus nurture, Buddhist philosophers reflected extensively on the distinction between ignorance that is the product of learning (*parikalpita/vikalpita, kun brtags*) and innate (*sahaja, lhan skyes*) or, more literally, "congenital" ignorance (see, for example, *Yogacaryābhumiviniscayasaṃgraha* f.108a; Eltschinger, "On the Career and Cognition of Yogins," 173; Eltschinger, "Ignorance, Epistemology and Soteriology Part I," 69 & f.93).

pervades all our ordinary concepts. Taken at face value, Candrakīrti seems to indict conceptuality across the board, even while identifying our concepts of the aggregates in particular as the cause of self-grasping:

> The wise say turning away from concepts is the fruit of analysis. Ordinary folks are bound by concepts; yogis, not conceptualizing, attain freedom (*mukti*).[38]

As if to avoid being misunderstood, in his commentary to this verse, Candrakīrti specifies that he means *all* concepts without exception (*ma lus pa*) are negated (*bkag pa*), although this didn't stop later Tibetan commentators from arguing over precisely this point.[39]

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[38] MA 6.117: *yā kalpanānāṃ vinivṛttir etat/ phalaṃ vicārasya budhā vadanti/ pṛthagjanāḥ kalpanayaiva baddhā/ akalpayan muktim upaiti yogī*.

Likewise, in the PsP, Candrakīrti states that *kleśa* arise from concepts (here qualified as inappropriate or *ayoniśas*), and that karma and *kleśa* function (*pravṛt*) on the basis of concepts (PsP, 350).

Candrakīrti also makes this point in the context of explaining how *yogīs* frees themselves through unraveling more basic underlying causes of suffering:

> And without having concepts, they do not produce the host of afflictive mental states, whose root is *satkāyadṛṣṭi*, from the imagined determination of "I" and "My." (PsP, 351: *na ca anavatārya vikalpam ahaṃmametyabhiniveśāt satkāyadṛṣṭimūlakaṃ kleśagaṇam utpādayanti.*)

In the context of his argument that realizing selflessness requires understanding the emptiness of the aggregates, Candrakīrti appeals to *Ratnāvalī* (1.35) to show that if there is grasping to the aggregates, there is a sense of "I" (MABh(X), 14).

Tibetan commentators go on to make this point more explicit. Gorampa, for instance, puts the point in technical terms, stating that a particular subset of concepts, grasping at the true existence (*bden 'dzin*) of the aggregates, is the "immediate uninterrupted cause" (*dngos rgyu nus pa thogs med*) of self-grasping (*lta ba' shan 'byed*, 77).

This scholarly ambivalence around whether it is concepts in general that bind is also reflected in how this verse has been translated, with Huntington, for instance, choosing "reified concepts" to translate *kalpanā* (Huntington, *The Emptiness of Emptiness: An Introduction to Early Indian Mādhyamika*, 171).

[39] MAB, 230. In Tibet, there was enormous controversy around the question of whether Candrakīrti actually intended to say that all concepts are to be gotten rid of, as opposed to just certain concepts. The linchpin of Je Tsongkhapa's interpretation was that here and elsewhere Candrakīrti was referring to grasping at true existence (*bden 'dzin*), not concepts in general (*dgongs pa rab gsal*, 67 but also 153), a claim that Gorampa and others took issue with (*lta ba' shan 'byed*, 26ff). To be clear, however, in a Tibetan context, there was no question that eventually all concepts were transcended—the Buddha was uncontroversially beyond all conceptuality. The question, rather, was whether the practice of the path and, more particularly, meditation on emptiness, involved negating (*bkag pa*) all concepts.

This controversy has resurfaced in contemporary academic interpretations of Candrakīrti, albeit in different form. In the context of interpreting a passage two verses prior (MA 115), Mark Siderits has suggested "*kalpanā*" here refers specifically to the concepts of his Yogācāra opponent, in the hopes of avoiding the paradoxical claim that all concepts are false (Siderits, "The *Prapañca* Paradox," 652 fn.10). Presumably, for Siderits, it would follow that "*kalpanā*" continues to have the same referent in the verses that follow, including 6.117 quoted above (it would be odd, after all, if after using the term in one specific but unspecified sense, Candrakīrti suddenly shifted to using the term more generally). The idea that "*kalpanā*" refers specifically to the concepts of the Yogācārin in this verse,

The issue is whether, upon analysis, holding onto a *svabhāva* is endemic to our ordinary everyday concepts—my idea that I'm writing, your belief that you're reading, and so on.[40] How we answer this question is the fork in the road where you choose what kind of Mādhyamika you are going to be. While there was never a question that some form of conceptuality was the problem, when Madhyamaka took root in Tibet, there was enormous controversy over whether the culprit was conceptuality in general or a certain specifiable subset.[41]

One possible interpretation worth considering is that, although there is a pre-philosophical innate tendency to grasp onto a *svabhāva*, not all every day concepts do this. Since we can, and regularly do, think about things without grasping onto them as independent or findable upon analysis, grasping onto a *svabhāv*a is a subset of ordinary conceptuality. Or, in Tibetan philosophical terms, since not all concepts grasp at true existence (*bden 'dzin*), there is still room for epistemically legitimate concepts that ground our knowledge (*pramāṇa, tshad ma*). According to this view, not all of our ordinary beliefs are mistaken, nor are our correct beliefs threatened by the denial of *svabhāva.*

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however, is a stretch. Considerably more so, in fact, than Je Tsongkhapa's suggestion, also intended to avoid an all-out condemnation of concepts, that here "*kalpanā*" refers to grasping extreme views (*mthar 'dzin ≈ antagrāha*) (which gets support from MA 6.115, where Candrakīrti singles out "wrong views" (*kudṛṣṭ*i)) (*dgongs pa rab gsal*, 437). While there is a logic to Je Tsongkhapa's reading, note that, in the MAB commentary to the intervening verse (MA 116), which again is all about concepts, Candrakīrti glosses the "*kalpanā*" in terms of "formative" concepts (*saṃskāra*):

> "formative (*'du bye ≈ saṃskāra*) *concepts* such as "form," "feeling," "virtue," "non-virtue," "existent" and "non-existent" (MAB(LVP), 230: *gzugs dang tshor ba dang dge ba dang mi dge ba dang dngos po and dngos po med pa la sogs pa'i rtog pa'i 'du byed.*)

[40] This caveat, that here we're concerned with our ordinary beliefs, is important for understanding this controversy. For one thing, Candrakīrti seems to leave open the possibility that Āryas, those who have experience emptiness, don't think in terms of a *svabhāva* when he states that they apprehend mere conventions (*kun rdzob tsam ≈ saṃvṛtimātra) (MABh(P), 108*). And, for another, as we shall see, the thought that things lack a *svabhāva* is also equally conceptual, a point that Gorampa and other Tibetan scholars will make much of.

[41] The question of whether concepts *tout court* were to be eliminated is the other side of the more well-known Tibetan debate around whether conventional truths are known by valid cognition (*pramāṇa, tshad ma*) (Thakchoe, *The Two Truths Debate: Tsongkhapa and Gorampa on the Middle Way*).

This view is appealing to the extent that we want to avoid diminishing the status of knowledge, even while taking on the corrective insights of Madhyamaka analysis. There is a great deal at stake here philosophically. Since a *svabhāva* does not exist on any account, if we were to say that all concepts grasp a *svabhāva*, we are committed to the claim that conception "falsifies."[42] If, on the other hand, we can limit the rot to just a particular subset, it is possible that some of our ordinary beliefs are correct. The epistemological and ontological fallout from this should be apparent.[43] There is a lot to say for this view—we preserve crucial distinctions between true and false, allow for a robust theory of knowledge, and avoid what many see as nihilistic skepticism.[44]

Containing the rot, however, is the challenge.[45] Ideally, in support of this view that only a subset of our concepts grasp onto a *svabhāva*, we would differentiate these concepts from all of

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[42] Siderits, "The *Prapañca* Paradox," 646.

[43] See Garfield, "Taking Conventional Truth Seriously"; Siderits, "Is Everything Connected to Everything Else? What the Gopīs Know"; Tillemans, "How Far Can We Reform Conventional Truth? Dismal Relativism, Fictionalism, Easy-Easy Truth, and the Alternatives," 152.

[44] According to this interpretation, well-worthy of our consideration, a book and its (nonexistent) independent nature (*svabhāva*) are two very separate things. Candrakīrti, it is argued, only rejects the latter—books aren't empty of being books, they are empty of independent existence. Indeed, on this view, the very reason he talks about *svabhāva* is to distinguish this metaphysically objectionable sort of entity from books and other ever day objects.

The first and best version of this interpretation is in the philosophy of Je Tsongkhapa (Jinpa, *Self, Reality and Reason in Tibetan Philosophy: Tsongkhapa's Quest for the Middle Way*; Jinpa, *Tsongkhapa: A Buddha in the Land of Snows*; Williams, "Identifying the Object of Negation: On '*Bodhicaryāvatāra*' 9:140 (Tib. 139)"; Tillemans, "How Far Can We Reform Conventional Truth? Dismal Relativism, Fictionalism, Easy-Easy Truth, and the Alternatives," 164). Iterations of this view are also found in contemporary interpretations of Candrakīrti (Garfield and Thakchoe, "Identifying the Object of Negation and the Status of Conventional Truth: Why the Dgag Bya Matters So Much to Tibetan Mādhyamikas").

[45] As preliminary reasons to think that the conventional object and its *svabhāva* are not so easily separated, consider three claims that Candrakīrti makes: 1) form is empty of form (*rūpam rūpeṇa śūnyam*) (MA 6.183). 2) Ordinary beings falsely think that form (*rūpa*) is the *svabhāva* of form (*rūpa*) (MAB(LVP), 307 & 308). 3) A s*vabhāva* is independent (MMK 15.2 and PsP commentary). Taking 1) and 2) together, suggests that form itself is the objectionable sort of *svabhāva*; adding 3) we get the view this is an idea of independence. Add to this Candrakīrti's admonition that emptiness of *svabhāva* is not the negation of some other thing:

> In so saying it is clarified that the emptiness of *svabhāva* is the eyes etc. being empty of the eyes etc., *not* empty in the sense of one thing being absent in another (*gcig la gcig med pa'i stong pa nyid*), as is the case of the eye being empty due to there being no inner agent (*nang gi byed pa*) or empty of subject and object.
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> (MAB(LVP), 308: *de la mig la sogs pa rnams mig la sogs pa rnams nyid kyis stong pa nyid du smras pas ni rang bzhin stong pa nyid yongs su gsal bar byas pa yin gyi/ mig ni nang gi byed pa dang bral ba'i phyir*

our other thoughts and beliefs—but this turns out to be a notoriously difficult psychological task.[46] In the very moment of thinking ‘this is a book,’ have I, in fact, already taken it as independent? Upon introspection, it seems that our default is to imagine that the book just is what it is in some intuitive yet inexplicable way. Indeed, it seems the *only* way we are able to say this is a book is to identify it in exclusion from its parts. If we saw a book as pages and words and cellulose fibers, there would be nothing for the word “book” to take hold of, no object, tangible thing, or linguistic referent.[47] For our purposes, let me leave this as an open philosophical and exegetical question: Is grasping at a *svabhāva* part of what it means to take something as an object or, had we enough philosophical precision and introspective insight, would we find that grasping at a *svabhāva* is a sort of *sui generis* mental event coloring our everyday cognitions?

Now, let us turn to the second question of whether thinking there is no *svabhāva* is also part of the problem. Supposing you are persuaded by the Madhyamaka analysis thus far, presumably you are thinking that there is no *svabhāva*. Now the question is whether this belief you have that there

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> *stong zhing gzung ba dang 'dzin pa'i bdag nyid kyis stong ngo zhes gcig la gcig med pa'i stong pa nyid ni ma yin no.*

[46] Tibetan commentarial literature brings out the difficulty of empirical distinguishing which concepts are the “bad” ones, with later followers of Je Tsongkhapa writing specialized texts that offer techniques for meditators to identify this grasping in their experience. See also Dreyfus, *The Sound of Two Hands Clapping The Education of a Tibetan Buddhist Monk*, 284.

Opponents of this view also made much of this difficulty. In particular, Gendun Chophal (1903-1951), a brilliantly eccentric modern critic of this view, exploited this difficulty to develop a full-blown critique of the claim that we can distinguish knowledge (*tshad ma, pramāṇa*) and grasping at true existence (*bden ’dzin*) (*glu sgrub dgongs rgyan*, 75-77; Lopez, “Painting the Target On the Identification of the Object of Negation (Dgag Bya)”; Lopez, *The Madman’s Middle Way*, 57 & 140 ff).

[47] There is a further philosophical question of whether this is even confined to thinking or language—perception too is a matter of picking out and isolating entities from an infinitely more complex background through enhancing edges, organizing input, and selecting objects (Thompson, “What’s in a Concept? Conceptualizing the Nonconceptual in Buddhist Philosophy and Cognitive Science”).

Note that Je Tsongkhapa accommodates this idea that some sense of independent existence is implicit in all of our though and language by distinguishing between the *appearance of true existence* (*bden snang*) and *grasping at true existence* (*bden ’dzin*) (*dgongs pa rab gsal*, 239). While only a subset of our concepts grasp at true existence, the *appearance of true existence* is inseparable from the phenomenological content of ordinary intentional states, concepts as well as perceptions. The fact that things *seem* as if they are independent is what allows language and thought to function.

is no *svabhāva* might also be part of the problem. We've seen that Madhyamaka analysis is supposed to help remove belief in a *svabhāva*, but is it also supposed to eventually clear away the conviction that there is no *svabhāva* as well? Given everything Candrakīrti has said thus far about how the problem lies in our residual belief in independent existence, it's easy to imagine that this as far as the problem goes—get rid of concepts of a *svabhāva*, however pervasive they turn out to be, and you're done. It is understandable, therefore, that this is how Candrakīrti has often been read, both in Tibet and among his academic interpreters.[48]

In fact, however, Candrakīrti does not appear to stop there. With a little more attention to what he says across his oeuvre, it seems that, even without these troubling concepts of independent existence, we are not yet out of the woods or, as Buddhists would put it, the "thicket of views" (*diṭṭhigahana*). The underlying intuition here is that reality (*tattva)*, what is experienced by a Buddha, is the pacification of *any* conceptualization—not an affirmation, nor a negation, nor something beyond affirmation and negation.[49]

This is where the famous *catuṣkoṭi* or tetralemma comes in.[50] On the interpretation of Candrakīrti I am offering here which, as it happens, was eventually adopted by Sakya interpreters like Gorampa and Shākya Chokden along with many others, the point of the tetralemma is to get

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[48] In Tibet, unlike Sakya interpreters like Drakpa Gyaltsan and Gorampa, Je Tsongkhapa pioneered such an interpretation as a more rational alternative to the prevailing view of neither existence nor nonexistence (*yod min med min gyi lta ba*). For contemporary versions of this view, see, for example, Garfield and Thakchoe, "Identifying the Object of Negation and the Status of Conventional Truth: Why the Dgag Bya Matters So Much to Tibetan Mādhyamikas," 74 ff.

[49] This point was systematized by those Tibetan interpreters who argued that even though *vikalpa* does not cause *kleśa* or produce saṃsāra, it is *the* "knowledge obscuration" (*jñeyāvaraṇa*, *shes sgrib*) which must be eliminated to attain the non-abiding nirvāṇa of the Buddha (to be discussed in Chapter Five). Gorampa, for instance, makes this point when he argues that "knowledge obscurations" are both concepts, which includes belief in *svabhāva* and belief in its absence, and the "influence" (*vāsanā, bag chags*) of those concepts (*lta ba' shan 'byed*, 74).

[50] For more systematic treatments of the *catuṣkoṭi*, and to appreciate that my interpretation is contentious, see Tillemans, *Materials for the Study of Āryadeva, Dharmapāla and Candrakīrti*, 74; Westerhoff, "Nāgārjuna's *Catuṣkoṭi*"; Tillemans, "What Happened to the Third and Fourth Lemmas in Tibet?"; Westerhoff, *Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka: A Philosophical Introduction*, 67–90.

us off of the conceptual seesaw between affirmation and denial by rejecting any possibility our concepts might take hold of. Consider, for instance, Nāgārjuna's MMK 22.11:

> "It is empty" is not to be said, nor "It is not empty," nor that it is both, nor that it is neither; ["empty"] is said only for the sake of instruction *(prajñapti)*.[51]

So construed, the tertralemma leads us from the insight that things are empty to what is supposed to be a truly liberating non-propositional awareness in which one neither affirms nor denies anything.[52] In other words, the next step after seeing that *x* is empty is to let go of the claims that it is empty or that it isn't, or both, or neither. So it is that, in the context of selflessness, Candrakīrti argues that while to some the Buddha taught a Self, whereas to other's he denied it, his final teaching was to teach neither the affirmation of the Self nor its denial.[53]

The most immediate upshot of this is that the way things are (*tattva*), what Candrakīrti and other Buddhist philosophers call "ultimate reality" (*paramārtha satya*), cannot be thought or spoken.[54] Since to think or speak about something is to conceptualize it, the pacification of such conceptualization is by definition unthinkable. So it is that Nāgārjuna defines reality or *tattva* as:

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[51] MMK 22.11: *śūnyam iti na vaktavyam aśūnyam iti vā bhavet / ubhayaṃ nobhayaṃ ceti prajñaptyarthaṃ tu kathyate.* Trans. Siderits and Katsura, *Nāgārjuna's Middle Way:* Mulamadhyamakakārikā, 247. For an altogether different interpretation of this verse see Garfield, "Madhyamaka, Nihilism, and the Emptiness of Emptiness," 45.

[52] As Westerhoff has shown, the tetralemma is put to multiple uses even within Nāgārjuna's corpus (*Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka: A Philosophical Introduction*, 74 & 83). Further, even in this context in which each possibility is systematically eliminated, contemporary commentarial literature tends to want to avoid the sort of apophatic interpretation I'm pushing here. The motivation for these tamer readings is that, generally speaking, if a substantive philosophical contribution is a good thing and "mysticism" is a bad thing, a hermeneutic of generosity demands a different take on the tetralemma. And, more specifically, the intuition that Nāgārjuna's obvious commitment to careful analysis would be at odds with taking the tetralemma as an all-ought assault on thought (Garfield and Priest, "Nagarjuna and the Limits of Thought").

[53] PsP 355-356. For a superb philological defense of this interpretation of Candrakīrti see MacDonald, "Knowing Nothing: Candrakīrti and Yogic Perception," 158–65.

[54] Yoshimizu, "Reasoning-for-Others in Candrakīrti's Madhyamaka Thought," 430.

> Not known through another, quieted, unfabricated by fabrication, nonconceptual, non-plural—this is the definition of the ultimate (*tattva*).[55]

Here and elsewhere, Nāgārjuna often contrasts the fabrication or *prapañca* of saṃsāra with unfabricated nirvāṇa and emptiness. Evocative and richly layered though this term is, to keep things simple, for present purposes think of *prapañca* as preliminary to, or near synonym of, conceptualization.[56] The point here is that, according to this "definition" of *tattva*, seeing reality is constituted by the absence of conceptualization in which all the referents (*nimitta*) of our concepts and language are pacified, without subjects and objects, identity or difference.[57] When we take this claim literally it has arresting consequences—whatever we say about the way things are is necessarily false. If you said it, or could say it, or even think it, that isn't it.

These Madhyamaka denials that the ultimate can be spoken—'not this,' 'not that,' 'not conceptualized,' 'not existent' or 'not nonexistent'—can easily be misread as pointing to an ultimate state of affairs that cannot be captured by our limited concepts.[58] This way of interpreting Madhyamaka, sometimes called the "metaphysical interpretation," holds that reality outstrips our

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[55] MMK, 18.9: *aparapratyayaṃ śāntaṃ prapañcair aprapañcitam / nirvikalpam anānārtham etat tattvasya lakṣaṇam.* Translation by John Dunne, unpublished manuscript.

[56] As it turns out, it is devilishly difficult to specify what *prapañca* means with any precision. More particularly, the meaning of *prapañca* oscillates between a subjective mental act tied to our use of language on the one hand, and the referents of language on the other (*In Clear Words: The Prasannapadā, Chapter One*, 2:42 fn.98). For discussions of *prapaṇca* see Nanananda, *Concept and Reality in Early Buddhist Thought*; Siderits, *Personal Identity and Buddhist Philosophy: Empty Persons*, 208; Salvini, "Etymologies of What Can(Not) Be Said: Candrakīrti on Conventions and Elaborations," 674 ff.; Siderits, "The *Prapañca* Paradox"; Lugli, "The Conception of Language in Indian Mahāyāna: With Special Reference to the *Laṅkāvatāra*," 137; Williams, "Some Aspects of Language and Construction in Madhyamaka," 30.

Candrakīrti gives both a terse definition of *prapañca* as that which is "characterized by referring, referent, and so forth" (PsP, 11: *abhidhānābhidheyādilakṣaṇasya prapañcasya*) and well as lengthier explanation in his commentary on MMK 18.5 (PsP, 350), discussed by Salvini ("Etymologies of What Can(Not) Be Said: Candrakīrti on Conventions and Elaborations," 678 ff). See also PSP(M), 133.

[57] For further textual support for this way of reading Candrakīrti on ineffability I defer to MacDonald, "Knowing Nothing: Candrakīrti and Yogic Perception," 146–58.

[58] Ineffability in this sense of our course-grained concepts failing to capture the fine-grained particularity of reality *is* an important part of Buddhist epistemology, it just isn't what Mādhyamikas are talking about in this context (Tillemans, "How to Talk about Ineffable Things: Dignāga and Dharmakīrtion Apoha"; Ho, "Resolving the Ineffability Paradox," 70).

cognitive and linguistic capacities, leaving us speechless, with only negations as a way to point to the real thing.[59] According to this reading, Madhyamaka negations do much the same thing as the *via negativa* approaches in Christian theology—since we cannot we say what reality or God is actually, the best we can do is say what it is not. A more familiar example, for most of us, is the clichéd claim that words cannot express whatever it is that the speaker was hoping they would, whether that is condolences, sorrow, or joy. In such cases, however, the point is that language lacks the capacity to express the profundity or enormity of its topic. While Tibetan philosophers, including Shākya Chokden, eventually developed a version of this view that would warrant our attention if space allowed, even its staunchest proponents often conceded that, for all its virtues, this is not the way to read Candrakīrti.[60]

According to the view I have been offering, on the other hand, the reason this so-called "reality" cannot be spoken is because there is not anything there to be said, not because there is, as it were, so much to be said that words will never suffice. If something was real, that could spoken, if nothing was real, that too could be spoken. Likewise, if there was a reality beyond something and nothing, perhaps there too concepts might at least point the way. The idea here is that since ultimate reality is the freedom from all conceptualization and propositions, expressing it is as contradictory as thinking that you are not thinking. This is what it means to say that

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[59] Siderits, *Buddhism as Philosophy*, 181; Siderits and Garfield, "Defending the Semantic Interpretation: A Reply to Ferraro," 657. For a good example of this "metaphysical interpretation," see Murti, "Saṃvṛtti and Paramārtha in Mādhyamika and Advaita Vedānta"; Murti, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism: A Study of the Mādhyamika System*, 228 ff.

[60] For discussions of this "other emptiness" (*gzhan stong*) approach, see Kapstein, "We Are All Gzhan Stong Pas"; Komarovski, "From the Three Natures to the Two Natures: On a Fluid Approach to the Two Versions of Other-Emptiness from Fifteenth-Century Tibet"; Mathes, "Introduction: The History of the Rang Stong/Gzhan Stong Distinction from Its Beginning through the Ris-Med Movement"; Mathes, "Presenting a Controversial Doctrine in a Conciliatory Way: Mkhan Chen Gang Shar Dbang Po's (1925–1958/59?) Inclusion of *Gzhan Stong* ('Emptiness of Other') within Prāsaṅgika"; Komarovski, *Visions of Unity The Golden Pandita Shakya Chokden's New Interpretation of Yogacara and Madhyamaka*, 127.

emptiness is a non-affirming negation (*prasajya*)—the negation of propositions in no way implies something else that can be grasped, referenced, or conceptualized.[61] What we are talking about here is just the pacification of the web of conceptuality (*kalpanājāla*), not some transcendent reality to be discovered lurking behind our concepts.[62]

1.4. Ineffability & Utterance

If what we are calling "reality" is the pacification of all concepts and language, what are we doing philosophizing about emptiness? Or, for that matter, what are we to make of Candrakīrti's own attempt to articulate the ultimate? Isn't there, in fact, something paradoxical and self-defeating about announcing that the ultimate cannot be spoken? Indeed, *prima facie* there appear to be two problems with such an apophatic approach: first, how are you not contradicting yourself? And second, why are you bothering to talk about reality at all?

Let us consider the charge of paradox first. The claim here is that Candrakīrti fall into a paradox as soon as he claims that reality is ineffable. Since the claim "reality is ineffable" presumably refers to reality, there is, it turns out, at least one thing you can say about reality, thereby contradicting the claim that it was ineffable. While ineffability paradoxes are hardly peculiar to Buddhism, recurring in various forms in Christianity and Islam, as well as in Western Philosophy, looking at how Mādhyamikas avoid the problem will take us to the heart of what they mean by *vyavahāra-satya* or "conventional truth"—the last piece of the puzzle we will need to have in place before we can back to discussing nirvāṇa.[63]

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[61] For a discussion of negations in Nāgārjuna, see Westerhoff, *Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka: A Philosophical Introduction*, 68.

[62] PsP, 350.

[63] Jones and Gellman, "Mysticism"; Jones, *Philosophy of Mysticism: Raids on the Ineffable*; Ahsan, "Islamic Mystical Dialetheism: Resolving the Paradox of God's Unknowability and Ineffability"; Garfield and Priest,

What produces the paradox, however, is not the ineffability claim *per se* but, rather, the assumption that this claim refers to reality. From what Candrakīrti tells us, however, there is every reason to think he is denying that anything refers to reality, ineffability claims included—or, more accurately, his point is that there is no reality to refer to, insofar as all he is offering is the pacification of concepts and language:[64]

> If there were something within the scope (*gocara*) of the mind (*citta*), then through the attribution of some semantic sign (*nimitta*) to it, words would apply. But when it makes no sense for there to be an object (*viṣaya*) of the mind, then to what would a semantic sign be attributed such that words would refer to it?[65]

Since there is nothing that can be known, there is nothing that can be said (*abhidhātavya*). And, to make the point explicit, the same goes for the claim that reality is ineffable—if there were something we were experiencing or thinking, only then might this ineffability claim have a referent.

The fallout from this claim that, whether they assert it explicitly or not, Mādhyamikas are pushed towards the distinction between a discursive and non-discursive ultimate, perhaps first articulated by Candrakīrti's predecessor and rival, Bhāviveka.[66] Specifically, alongside the non-

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"Nagarjuna and the Limits of Thought," 88. Graham Priest has suggested that their acceptance of paraconsistent logic explains why Buddhist philosophers didn't try to wriggle out of the paradox as vigorously as one might expect. This suggestion is only convincing if one thinks it is plausible that Buddhist philosophers did accept paraconsistent logic (Priest, "Speaking of the Ineffable"). For reasons against seeing Madhyamaka as dialetheism, see Siderits, "The *Prapañca* Paradox," 646 fn.2; Tillemans, *How Do Mādhyamikas Think?*, 67 ff.

[64] Unlike the Liar paradox, here one can deny that the claim "reality is ineffable" refers to reality without accepting that the claim is false, since for Candrakīrti, referring to reality is not a requirement for truth.

[65] PsP, 364: *yadi cittasya kaścid gocaraḥ syāt, tatra kiṃcin nimittam adhyāropya syād vācāṃ pravṛttiḥ/ yadā tu cittasya viṣaya evānupapannaḥ, tadā kva nimittādhyāropaḥ, yena vācāṃ pravṛttiḥ syāt?*

[66] If true, my claim that Mādhyamikas are inexorably pushed in this direction partly explains why Candrakīrti's Tibetan interpreters relied so heavily on this distinction, despite its absence from his writings (*lta ba' shan 'byed* 24 ff.; *spyi don*, 58-59). While Bhāviveka distinguishes between the ultimate with and without elaboration in his *Tarkajvālā*, this distinction is only made explicit in the *Madhyamakārthasaṃgraha*—traditionally also attributed to Bhāviveka but of contested authorship (MAS, verses 4-5) (Murti, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism: A Study of the Mādhyamika System*, 248; Eckel, *Jñānagarbha's Commentary on the Distinction between the Two Truths: An Eighth Century Handbook of Madhyamaka Philosophy*, 112; Tauscher, "*Paramārtha* as an Object of Cognition - *Paryāya*- and *Aparyāyaparamārtha* in Svatantrika-Madhyamaka"; Tillemans, "Yogic Perception, Meditation, and

conceptualized (*aparyāya*) ultimate beyond language, we must also speak of a conceptualized (*paryāya*) ultimate firmly within the bounds of language and concepts, in order to give a referent for all of our talk about the ultimate.[67] While Candrakīrti never bothers to systematically differentiate a conceptualized ultimate, he appears equally committed to the view that no talk of the ultimate refers to the ultimate, this very ineffability claim included.[68]

The trouble with what I am saying is that, on such a view, it becomes disturbingly unclear why we are talking about reality at all. This is the second problem with ineffability that I was alluding to above. It seems that Candrakīrti avoids the paradox only by turning to a self-defeating picture of our own philosophizing, or as he put the objection:

> But, if it is not spoken, the knower is unable to know its nature (*svabhāva*) just as it is.[69]

Enlightenment," 300; Garfield, "Thinking Beyond Thought: Tsongkhapa and Mipham on the Conceptualized Ultimate," 338–39; Ruegg, *The Buddhist Philosophy of the Middle: Essays on Indian and Tibetan Madhyamaka*, 157 & 170).

[67] As Graham Priest has pointed out, at first blush this distinction seems to only make things worse. Since all claims about the ultimate can only be about the conceptualized, the same must also be said for the claim that the ultimate is ineffable. To wit, when we say "the ultimate is ineffable" we are, in fact, referring only to the conceptualized ultimate. This immediately leads to a contradiction more damning than the one we were trying to wriggle out from under: if the conceptualized ultimate is what it is supposed to be—conceptualized and linguistically available—how is it that we are saying that it is ineffable? See Priest, "Speaking of the Ineffable," 97; Garfield, Deguchi, and Priest, "Those Conceptions Proliferate Everywhere: Reply to Kassor," 412.

Drawing on Dharmakīrti and, especially Sakya Pandita's account of *apoha*, Gorampa offer an intriguing response to something like Priests objection. In short, his argument is that the claim 'the ultimate is ineffable' must be understood as an intentional conflation of the conceptualized and unconceptualized ultimate, just as our thought 'this is an apple' conflates a conceptually constructed universal with the real thing. His point here is that doing philosophy, whether that's Dharmakīrtian inference or Madhyamaka, only makes sense from within this conflation. (*rlom tshe*). So it is that, even though technically our statement 'the ultimate is ineffable' refers to the conceptualized ultimate, the first step towards doing any intelligible philosophy is to conflate the conceptual and the real, even while remaining aware that this is what you're doing (*spyi don*, 77, 98 & 106).

[68] For further philosophical reflection on resolving Buddhist versions of the ineffability paradox, see Ho, "Saying the Unsayable"; Ho, "Resolving the Ineffability Paradox," 75.

[69] PsP, 444: *kiṃ tu anukte yathāvadavasthitaṃ svabhāvaṃ pratipattā pratipattuṃ na samartha.*

In other words, if we take this ineffability claim to its logical conclusion, since nothing refers to reality, not even our apophatic denials that reality can be spoken, how are we to account for the fact that we do use language and philosophy to understand reality?

This is where "conventional truth" comes in. To see how Candrakīrti responds to this objection, first we need to understand what he means by conventional truth. Even though reality or ultimate truth cannot be expressed, we go around, day in and day out, using language and concepts. Alongside our more quotidian usages, sometimes, as we've just seen, we even use language to talk about ultimate truths. Since we've already seen that, in reality, there is nothing we can think of or talk about, thought and language must deal in unreal fictions or, as Buddhist philosophers like Candrakīrti put, in conventional truths:

> Conventional truth (*saṃvṛtisatya*) is said to be the [object] of erroneous perception (*mṛṣādṛśa*).[70]

The idea here is this: since everything is ultimately inexpressible, neither empty, nor not empty, nor both, nor neither, they only emerge as the objects of our thoughts and words through the prism of our misunderstanding. Even though, in reality, a book disappears in an ever-receding complex of dependent relations, we see it as a book, we think of it as a book. So it is that, conventionally, from the perspective of our own misunderstanding, a book is a book, a rope is a rope.[71]

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[70] MA, 6.23: *mṛṣādṛśāṃ saṃvṛtisatyam uktam*. Li, "Dimensions of Candrakīrti's Conventional Reality," 51.

[71] Not oblivious to the way in which this would seem to conflate the important distinctions between things that are for all practical purposes real (like books and ropes) and things that are not (like imagined snakes or Creationism), Candrakīrti goes on to distinguish between things that are conventionally true and false (MA, 6.24-26).

For textual discussions of this point, see Li, 52; Salvini, "Etymologies of What Can(Not) Be Said: Candrakīrti on Conventions and Elaborations," 667; Newman, "Candrakīrti on Lokaprasiddhi: A Bad Hand, or an Ace in the Hole?"; and for philosophical reflections, see Garfield, "Taking Conventional Truth Seriously"; Garfield and Thakchoe, "Identifying the Object of Negation and the Status of Conventional Truth: Why the Dgag Bya Matters So Much to Tibetan Mādhyamikas"; Tillemans, "How Far Can We Reform Conventional Truth? Dismal Relativism, Fictionalism, Easy-Easy Truth, and the Alternatives," 161.

The thing to understand here is that the ultimate lack of anything to which we might refer is precisely why conventional truths are of such importance. If reality could be expressed, we could just cut to the chase and talk in terms of ultimate truths but, since reality cannot be expressed or conceptualized, we must delicately work out our salvation using conventional truths:

> Ultimate reality is not taught without relying on conventions. Without understanding ultimate reality, nirvāṇa is not obtained.[72]

The point here is that, even though conventional truth is presented in purely pedagogical terms, in no way does this diminish its importance.[73] Attaining nirvāṇa requires understanding emptiness, which, in turn, requires the language and concepts of conventional truths.[74] It is for this reason that Candrakīrti talks about conventional truths as a method:

> Conventional truth is a means (*upāya*), ultimate truth is an end (*upeya*).[75]

Even though there is a great deal more to be said about the Two Truths, their basic structure is means versus ends. Doctrines and statements of purely instrumental value are used as a means to understand ultimate truth and attain nirvāṇa.[76]

That said, in Madhyamaka texts, conventional truth is more than just a self-reflective way of understanding much of their own creed as instrumentally usefully but epistemically false. In a way that is confusing to the philosophically attentive reader, *satya,* what I have been calling "truth,"

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[72] MMK 24.10: *vyavahāram anāśritya paramārtho na deśyate / paramārtham anāgamya nirvāṇaṃ nādhigamyate.* Translation by John Dunne, unpublished manuscript. For discussion, see Salvini, "Dependent Arising, Non-Arising, and the Mind: MMK1 and the Abhidharma," 494. For discussion, see Salvini, 494.

[73] Contrast this with Tillemans and Newland's juxtaposition between seeing conventional truth as pedagogical versus "taking it seriously" ("An Introduction to Conventional Truth," 11).

[74] For an account of conventional truth along the lines I suggest, see Ziporyn, "A Comment on 'the Way of the Dialetheist: Contradictions in Buddhism,' by Yasuo Deguchi, Jay L. Garfield, and Graham Priest," 345.

[75] MA, 6.80: *upāyabhūtaṃ vyavahārasatyam / upeyabhūtaṃ paramārthasatyam.*

[76] Ziporyn, "A Comment on 'the Way of the Dialetheist: Contradictions in Buddhism,' by Yasuo Deguchi, Jay L. Garfield, and Graham Priest"; Ziporyn, *Emptiness and Omnipresence: An Essential Introduction to Tiantai Buddhism*, Ch.2; cf. Sharf, "Buddhist Modernism and the Rhetoric of Meditative Experience," 267.

also refers to the content of these provisional claims. So, not just to truth-bearers like teachings, statements, and claims but also to what these conventional claims are about. While in a Buddhist doctrinal context this means karma, rebirth, and whatever else the Buddha taught besides emptiness, more generally, everything in our world and beyond, everything that appears to us ordinary folk, our mind and body, particulars and abstractions, are all conventionally real (again *satya*!).[77]

Now we are in a position to understand Candrakīrti's response to the objection that, so construed, his own philosophizing is self-defeating. As he put the objection earlier, if there is nothing we can say about the ultimate, there would be no way of using language and concepts to know reality. Candrakīrti's response in a nutshell is that, even though what we say can't actually be about the ultimate, our talk can still have pedagogical value:

> Through superimposition (*āropa*) based on conventional truth (*vyavahārasatya*) we too say 'this is empty,' also 'this is not empty,' also 'this is empty and not empty,' also 'this is neither empty nor not empty.' We do so in accordance (*anurodha*) with disciples for the sake of interaction (*vyavahāra*).[78]

Or, in other words, even though Madhyamaka philosophy cannot express the inexpressible, it still has instrumental value for the appropriate disciple. The takeaway of all this for our purposes is this: On one hand, in reality there is no goal, no beginning, no suffering and no cessation, nor is there anything to be said or understood; and, on the other, precisely for this reason, we must talk about goals, starting points, suffering, and cessations.

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[77] The way Candrakīrti explains it, these conventions are real (*bden pa = satya*) to us but "mere" conventions (*kun rdzob tsam = saṃvṛtimātra*) to those who perceived emptiness (MAB(LVP), 108).

[78] PsP, 444: *ato vayam api āropato vyavahārasatye eva sthitvā vyavahārārthaṃ vineyajanānurodhena śūnyam ity api brūmaḥ, aśūnyamityapi, śūnyāśūnyamityapi, naiva śūnyaṃ nāśūnyamityapi brūmaḥ.*

2. Freedom from Suffering

So it is that, in the end, this is all Madhyamaka leaves us with: there are means, conventional pragmatic truths, and there are ends, the ultimate truth, unborn, unceasing, inexpressible. To put this in a soteriological framework, let us consider the Buddha's enormously influential simile of the raft, according to which the spiritual seeker is like a man trying to cross a river:

> Bhikkhus, suppose a man in the course of a journey saw a great expanse of water, whose near shore was dangerous and fearful and whose further shore was safe and free from fear, but there was no ferryboat or bridge for going to the far shore.[79]

The man turns out to be resourceful. He gathers grass, twigs, and branches to make himself a raft upon which he is able to cross safely to the other side. But, like DIY aces from across the ages, his first thought is to haul it around with him, even though it is no longer of any use:

> This raft has been very helpful to me, since supported by it and making an effort with my hands and feet, I got safely to the far shore. Suppose I were to hoist it on my head or load it on my shoulder, and then go wherever I want.[80]

After pointing out how it would be far more appropriate to leave the raft at the shore, the Buddha brings his point home by likening the raft to the dharma:

> Bhikkhus, when you know the Dhamma to be similar to a raft, you should abandon even the teachings (*dhamma*), how much more so things contrary to the teachings.[81]

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[79] MN *i*, 134: *seyyathāpi, bhikkhave, puriso addhānamaggappaṭipanno. so passeyya mahantaṃ udakaṇṇavaṃ, orimaṃ tīraṃ sāsaṅkaṃ sappaṭibhayaṃ, pārimaṃ tīraṃ khemaṃ appaṭibhayaṃ; na cassa nāvā santāraṇī uttarasetu vā apārā pāraṃ gamanāya.* Translation by Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya*, 228.

[80] MN *i*, 135. *bahukāro kho me ayaṃ kullo; imāhaṃ kullaṃ nissāya hatthehi ca pādehi ca vāyamamāno sotthinā pāraṃ uttiṇṇo. yaṃnūnāhaṃ imaṃ kullaṃ sīse vā āropetvā khandhe vā uccāretvā yena kāmaṃ pakkameyyan.* Translation by Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, 228.

[81] MN *i*, 135. *kullūpamaṃ vo, bhikkhave, dhammaṃ desitaṃ, ājānantehi dhammāpi vo pahātabbā pageva adhammā.* Translation by Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, 229.

The main takeaway of this passage is a straightforward point about non-attachment, that like a raft, even the Buddha's teachings must be let go of.[82]

Speaking now to our concerns, the parable also exposes what is so perplexing about Madhyamaka soteriology. As we are about to see, at first blush, Candrakīrti seems to argue that nirvāṇa too is another convention, another twig in the raft of the Buddhist teachings. What makes this puzzling is that, if nirvāṇa is part of the raft, what is the other shore? And, even more alarming for those on the raft, if nirvāṇa isn't the other shore, why are we adrift on a bundle of twigs in the first place? Indeed, it is also in the light of this riparian riddle that we can fully appreciate the consternation of the five hundred monks we began with in the *Brahmaviśeṣacintiparipṛcchā* (BV). Although, as the logic of fording would suggest, Candrakīrti will eventually gesture to what awaits at the other shore, first let us look at how he makes nirvāṇa into part of the raft, beginning where we left off in the BV with the bodhisattva Brahmā.

2.1. Nirvāṇa is Empty

When Brahmā clarifies the Buddha's intent to the much-aggrieved assembly, he teaches them that nirvāṇa is like space in so far as is there is nothing there beyond our idea of it:

> Now, imagine someone else who says he wants to find space and searches for it. No matter where he goes, and no matter how much he talks about it, he will not find space. Though he moves within space, he cannot see it. Why? Because space is just a name (*ming tsam*). Noble son, it is the same with these monks who search for a real nirvāṇa. Even though they function (*rnam par spyod* ≈

[82] Ziporyn has insightfully suggested how the parable must also be read as lesson about why we must hold fast to the dharma:

> It provides an explanation for why there must be some commitment, some clinging, in spite of the fact that attachment in general is the cause of all our problems. It tells us about how and why and what to desire even in the midst of our understanding that desire is the cause of suffering. It provides us with another model of the Middle Way. A raft must be clung to, committed to, depended on single-mindedly *at a certain time*—that is, while one is on the way across the river (*Emptiness and Omnipresence: An Essential Introduction to Tiantai Buddhism*, 29).

> *vicar*) within nirvāṇa, they cannot see it, cannot understand it. Why not? Noble son, because nirvāṇa is just a name (*ming tsam*). Just as we can utter the word "space," and yet there is nothing to take hold of, so can we utter "nirvāṇa, nirvāṇa," and yet there is nothing to take hold of (*gzung du med pa ≈ agrāhya*).[83]

Notice how it is not just nirvāṇa that has taken on a new meaning in this context. Whereas, in the previous chapter, the analogy of space was supposed to show that nirvāṇa was not conditioned by causes, here the point is that nirvāṇa is ungraspable (*gzung du med pa ≈ agrāhya*).[84] Just as there is no such thing as space in any concrete sense over and beyond the word "space," when we try to point to, or pin down, what liberation is, the most we will find is the word "nirvāṇa."[85] As such, the takeaway from saying nirvāṇa is empty is negative—since it turns out that there is nothing behind our concept of nirvāṇa, we can finally stop looking for it. Grasping onto anything is a problem, leading as it does to attachment and suffering; grasping and attachment to nirvāṇa is no exception. What this leaves us with is a "nirvāṇa" that is just a raft or soteriological convention

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[83] BV, f.34a: *'di lta ste dper na / skyes bu gzhan zhig nam mkha' rnyed par bya'o / /zhes nam mkha' tsol te / phyogs dang phyogs mtshams su rgyug cing ji tsam nas nam mkha'i ming nas brjod kyang nam mkha' mi rnyed do // de nam mkha' de nyid kyi nang nas 'gro yang de mi mthong ngo / / de ci'i phyir zhe na / gang nam mkha' zhes bya ba 'di ni ming tsam mo / / rigs kyi bu de bzhin du dge slong 'di dag kyang mya ngan las 'das pa dngos por tsol te/mya ngan las 'das pa de nyid la rnam par spyod kyang de mi mthong khong du mi chud do / / de ci'i phyir zhe na/ rigs kyi bu gang mya ngan las 'das pa zhes bya ba de ni ming tsam mo / / ji ltar nam mkha' nam mkha' zhes brjod kyang gzung du med pa de bzhin du mya ngan las 'das pa mya ngan las 'das pa zhes brjod pa yang gzung du med pa'o.* Translation by Dharmachakra Translation Committee, *The Questions of Brahma-viśeṣacintin*, 1.90. Note that I have modified the translation by using "real" instead of "reified" to translate "*dngos por tshol*."

[84] Ziporyn offers an insightful reflection on space and emptiness (*Emptiness and Omnipresence: An Essential Introduction to Tiantai Buddhism*, 59 ff). For textual discussions of space in Mahāyāna literature, see Conze, *Buddhist Thought in India: Three Phases of Buddhist Philosophy*, 163–66; McMahan, *Empty Vision: Metaphor and Visionary Imagery in Mahāyāna Buddhism*, 76–81; Ruegg, *The Buddhist Philosophy of the Middle: Essays on Indian and Tibetan Madhyamaka*, 177; Apple, "The Knot Tied with Space": Notes on a Previously Unidentified Stanza in Buddhist Literature and Its Citation.," 174–78.

[85] Elsewhere in the sutra Brahmā is more explicit that one is not to be attached to nirvāṇa:

> Although the world is attached to nirvāṇa, this Dharma has neither saṃsāra nor nirvāṇa (Dharmachakra Translation Committee, *The Questions of Brahma-viśeṣacintin*, 1.188).
>
> (BV f.40a*: 'jig rten ni mya ngan las 'das pa la chags na/ chos 'di la ni 'khor ba yang ma mchis/ mya ngan las 'das pa yang ma mchis so.*)

Whatever the soteriology Brahmā is offering, it is clear that, for him, it leaves our attachment to nirvāṇa with nothing to hang on to.

(*vyavahāra*)—a useful concept designating the destination at the end of the path, not reflective of any underlying reality.

Candrakīrti's stated rationale for understanding nirvāṇa as purely a convention is that it is dependent, as he puts it in his commentary to Nāgārjuna's *Yuktiṣaṣṭikākārikā*:[86]

> [Objection:] So is nirvāṇa also a conventional truth? [Reply:] So it is, since samara and nirvāṇa both are worldly conventions in as much as, if saṃsāra is conceptualized, nirvāṇa is conceptualized.[87]

Candrakīrti fleshes out this point by appealing to the canonical claim that nirvāṇa is like an illusion:

> If [nirvāṇa] did not depend on the conceptualization of saṃsāra, it wouldn't be like an illusion. Therefore, even nirvāṇa is conceptually constructed as a conventional truth (*kun rdzob bden pa ≈ samvṛtisat*).[88]

Part of what Candrakīrti is saying here—that nirvāṇa qua the elimination of saṃsāra depends on saṃsāra—is quite straightforward. To think there could be such a nirvāṇa without saṃsāra is no different from trying to imagine AA meetings in a dry universe. Having eliminated or quit something depends on there being some prior thing which is given up.[89]

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[86] There is limited scholarship focused specifically on Candrakīrti's view of nirvāṇa, with MacDonald's "Knowing Nothing: Candrakīrti and Yogic Perception" by far the most useful, but see also Nayak, *Nirvāṇa in Candrakīrti's Prasannapadā: A Study in the Mādhyamika Concept of Nirvāṇa in the Context of Indian Thought*; Pasadika, "Nirvāṇa in Candrakīrti's Prasannapadā," 64.

[87] YṢV, 35: *ci mya ngan las 'das pa yang kun rdzob kyi bden pa yin nam / de de bzhin te / 'khor bar yongs su rtog pa yod na mya ngan las 'das par yongs su rtog ste de gnyis ga yang 'jig rten gyi tha snad yin pa'i phyir ro.*

See also Newman, "Candrakīrti on Lokaprasiddhi: A Bad Hand, or an Ace in the Hole?," 24.

[88] YṢV, 36: *gal te de 'khor bar rtog pa la bltos pa ma yin na de sgyu ma lta bur mi 'gyur ro / de bas na mya ngan las 'das pa yang kun rdzob kyi bden par yongs su brtags pa yin no*.

[89] The claim here that this dependence entails being a conventional truth, however, is not so straightforward—it flies in the face of received opinion, according to which ultimate truth too is dependent, and demands further evidence outside of the scope of this chapter (Garfield, "Dependent Arising and the Emptiness of Emptiness: Why Did Nāgārjuna Start with Causation?," 232). It is worth noting, however, that Madhyamaka accounts of nirvāṇa are where any study of this question should begin. In the MMK analysis of nirvāṇa (Ch.25), the reason the opponent's accounts of nirvāṇa fails is because their nirvāṇa would be dependent (*upādāya*).

For discussions of the relations between *upādāya* and *pratītya*, see Arnold, *Buddhists, Brahmins, and Belief: Epistemology in South Asian Philosophy of Religion*, 165 ff.; Salvini, "*Upādāyaprajñaptiḥ* and the Meaning of Absolutives: Grammar and Syntax in the Interpretation of Madhyamaka"; Arnold, "The Real According to Madhyamaka, Or: Thoughts on Whether Mark Siderits and I Really Disagree," 268. To wit, neither the positive (*bhāva*) nor negative accounts (*abhāva*) of nirvāṇa we explored in the last chapter can be the bona fide item, since both options are dependent (25.6 & 25.8). When this is coupled with Nāgārjuna's equation of emptiness and nirvāṇa,

The larger point here, however, is that nirvāṇa is merely a useful fiction, a point Candrakīrti brings out by asking us to reflect on the audience to whom saṃsāra and nirvāṇa were taught. There are ordinary beings like us who manage, just barely, to function within a net of illusions of our own making; and then they are Āryas who've seen through these illusions. To whom was the Buddha talking when he said there is saṃsāra and nirvāṇa? Since it would have been pointless to teach nirvāṇa to Āryas (whatever need they would have had for such a teaching is behind them), saṃsāra and nirvāṇa were just taught to ordinary beings.[90] Candrakīrti goes on to explain that the idea that there is a saṃsāra to be gotten rid of and a nirvāṇa to attained is powerful, for it makes us turn from (*rgyab kyis lta ba* ≈ *vimukha*) the former and aspire (*mos pa*) to the latter, even though, in reality, nirvāṇa is just a useful fiction.[91]

2.2 Emptiness is Nirvāṇa

Let us stake stock of where we are: We were on a raft headed to the other shore but now we've just been told that the idea there was another shore is itself just another story, a technique to get us across. But then across to where? And why? More than just the raft simile seems to be falling apart. Since means and ends are mutually dependent concepts, it doesn't make sense to say nirvāṇa is just a means (*upāya*), if we aren't going to specify an end. A means to what? For any of this to make sense, are Mādhyamikas in fact relying on some other, yet to be disclosed ends, some special Mahāyāna fruit, Buddhahood or non-abiding nirvāṇa?

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the upshot is that emptiness is not dependent—a point that is an intuitive conclusion for the view of emptiness I have offered—nothing can be predicated on emptiness, not even dependence.

[90] YṢV, 33.

[91] YṢV, 34.

In some perfunctory sense, yes. The raft-talk could still be considered coherent because there is another sense of nirvāṇa which is an ultimate truth.[92] Consider how Candrakīrti puts it in his etymological discussion of *pāramitā* we saw earlier:

> "*Pāra*" refers to the further (*para*) shore (*tīra*) of the ocean of saṃsāra. Awakening (*buddhatva*) is to have completely eliminated *kleśa* obscurations (*kleśāvaraṇa*) and cognitive obscurations (*jñeyāvaraṇa*). As such, having gone (*ita*) to the opposite shore (*pāra*), in the sense of having arrived, it [i.e., Awakening] is '*pāramitā.*'[93]

So, it would seem everything is still in place. We are still on a raft, still trying to cross the ocean of saṃsāra, and there is still an opposite shore—it's just that now instead of that puny conventional unconditioned cessation of the Abhidharma, we are headed towards something which is bigger, better, and, crucially, ultimate (*tattva*).

In fact, however, as soon as we see what constitutes the "real" nirvāṇa it becomes clear that what it means to say we are going, or have gone (*ita*), to the opposite shore means something altogether different. So, what is this nirvāṇa? Emptiness. When Nāgārjuna is pressed to say what nirvāṇa is, this is what he tells us:

> The uneliminated, the unobtained; the not annihilated, the not eternal—this is called "unceased unarisen nirvāṇa."[94]

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[92] As opposed to the view according to which a Madhyamaka account of nirvāṇa is purely a matter of showing that nirvāṇa is not ultimately real—that nirvāṇa is just a raft (Siderits and Garfield, "Defending the Semantic Interpretation: A Reply to Ferraro," 663).

[93] MABh(X), 24: *pāram ucyate / saṃsārārṇavasya yat paraṃ tīraṃ niravaśeṣakleśajñeyāvaraṇaprahāṇarūpaṃ buddhatvam/ pāram itā gatā pāramiteti.* Lopez offers a useful overview of *pāramitā* etymologies (*The Heart Sūtra Explained:Indian and Tibetan Commentaries*, 21).

[94] MMK 25.3: *aprahīṇam asaṃprāptam anucchinnam aśāśvatam / aniruddham anutpannam etan nirvāṇam ucyate.* Translation by John Dunne, unpublished manuscript. In his preamble to this verse, Candrakīrti tells us that here Nāgārjuna is responding to his opponent's demand that Mādhyamika's give their own definition of nirvāṇa:

> Indeed, if proponents of emptiness do not assert a nirvāṇa whose defining characteristic is the cessation of the aggregates or of *kleśa*, what do they assert as its defining characteristic? (PsP, 521: *yadi khalu śūnyatāvādinaḥ kleśānāṃ skandhānāṃ vā nivṛttilakṣaṇaṃ nirvāṇaṃ necchanti,kiṃ lakṣaṇaṃ tarhi icchanti?*).

See also Sponberg for comments and alternative translation ("Dynamic Liberation in Yogācāra Buddhism," 58).

Rather than seeing nirvāṇa as the termination of a causal process, Nāgārjuna is, at least in some sense, identifying nirvāṇa with emptiness. In the total dissolution of reference, the dropping of every story line, thought, or claim, there is no karma and there is no kleśa. The Mādhyamika's point is that this alone is freedom. There is no other nirvāṇa beyond this that can be wrought through any causal process.

Now we can clearly see why, from a Madhyamaka perspective, the question of what it means to get rid of suffering must be answered by rejecting its premise—there is no solution to the problem of suffering because there is no suffering. Or, in other words, for Mādhyamikas, liberation is not achieved through getting rid of the causes of suffering but, rather, through realizing there are no causes of suffering. Indeed, strictly speaking, liberation isn't achieved: just as we don't "arrive back" in our beds after waking from a dream, we don't achieve the emptiness of suffering which, of course, has always been there.

The raft no longer gets you from point A to point B, even in the sense of some sort of internal transformation, but, rather, provides a means to realize that here in point A, the muddy banks of saṃsāra, there is already all the freedom your heart can desire. The idea here is that by identifying the other shore, point B, with emptiness, what we had thought was point A, saṃsāra, turns out, upon inspection, to be point B. Instead of the path leading to nirvāṇa through causal progress, nirvāṇa is disclosed in the perception that there is nothing to be gained or eliminated.[95] As Candrakīrti puts it:

> It is to be understood that in nirvāṇa there is no elimination of anything nor is there cessation of anything. Therefore, nirvāṇa is precisely the annihilation of concepts without exception.[96]

[95] MacDonald, "The World Transcendent. A Madhyamaka Interpretation.," 131.

[96] PsP 522: *tad evaṃ nirvāṇe na kasyacit prahāṇaṃ nāpi kasyacin nirodha iti vijñeyam / tataś ca niravaśeṣakalpanākṣayarūpam eva nirvāṇam.* (Note that this passage is missing in PSP(D), 174b4).

This non-striving quietist conception of arriving paradoxically at a point where there was no need for a path in the first place is hardly unique to Candrakīrti but, rather, pervades Mahāyāna literature in various forms. One is reminded, for instance, of the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra's* statement that:

> Thus, there is nothing to be obtained, nothing to discarded. It is to be seen that it is what it is. One who sees that it is so is liberated.[97]

Liberation is about seeing that there is nothing that needs to be changed or liberated.

We find one of the most insightful discussions of the soteriological implications of this Madhyamaka nirvāṇa in Je Tsongkhapa's commentary to the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra*, one of his earliest and arguably most magnificent works. In the context of comparing Madhyamaka and Yogācāra views of Buddha Nature, philosophizing in a style that he would later distance himself from, he begins:

> On this point, even though Madhyamaka and Mind-only[98] agree that Buddha Nature is the basis (*rgyu*) upon which good qualities are achievable and obscurations are removable in the minds of sentient beings, and [they agree that] obscurations being removable comes down to the fact that stains are adventitious (*glo bur ba*), they disagree over what adventitious (*glo bur ba*) means. Since, according to Madhyamaka, it means that although stains are merely mentally imputed, in reality (*don la*) they are the emptiness (*stong nyid*) of being substantially established (*rdzas su ma grub pa*).[99]

In other words, there is a consensus between the two schools that it is Buddha Nature that guarantees that our flaws are not hardwired but are, rather, adventitious accidental properties.

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[97] AA 5.21: *nāpaneyam ataḥ kiñcit prakṣeptavyaṃ na kiṃcana / draṣṭavyaṃ bhūtato bhūtaṃ bhūtadarśī vimucyate*. Note that this same verse also occurs in RGV 154.

[98] For Je Tsongkhapa and many other Tibetan doxographers, "mind-only" (*sems tsam pa*) simply refers to Yogācāra. This is in contrast to Shakya Chokden, a near contemporary of Je Tsongkhapa whom we shall meet in subsequent chapters, for whom these terms are not all equivalent (Komarovski, *Visions of Unity The Golden Pandita Shakya Chokden's New Interpretation of Yogacara and Madhyamaka*, 8).

[99] *gser phreng*, 339: *de la spyir sems can gyi shes rgyud la yon tan skyer rung zhing / sgrib pa spang du rung ba'i rgyu tsam zhig rigs su 'jog par dbu sems gnyis ka bzhed pa mthun zhing spang du rung ba yang dri ma glo bur bar song bas yin la / glo bur ba'i don la mi mthun te 'di ltar dbu ma pa rnams ni dri ma zhes pa blos btags nas bzhag pa tsam yin gyi don la rdzas su ma grub pa'i stong nyid yin pas glo bur bar 'jog go / sems tsam pa rnams ni dri ma ni sems dang sems las byung ba gzhan dbang gi ngo bo yin pas / rdzas su bden yang.*

Where they disagree is that, for Yogācāra, the reason stains are adventitious is that, as genuinely causal mental properties, they can only be changed through psychological remediation; whereas the Mādhyamika hold that stains are adventitious because they do not really exist. Continuing in this manner at length, he concludes:

> Also, since [the view that] stains are unexhausted and unborn is characteristic of the latter [Madhyamaka] system, accordingly, the term "abandoned" (*spangs pa*) refers just to knowing that what is to be abandoned (*spang bya*) is without essence (*rang bzhin*), even though what is to be abandoned and its remedy are not accepted as truly (*bden par*) substantially separate (*rdzas tha dad*). For they assert that it is like an illusory elephant defeating an illusory elephant.[100]

Setting aside the question of what this says or should say about Yogācāra, Je Tsongkhapa's point here is that, according to Madhyamaka, attaining nirvāṇa is not a psychological process of eliminating something but, rather, a matter of seeing that there is nothing to be eliminated. So construed, liberation is an epistemic process of opening to what does not need to be opened and cleansing what needs no cleansing.

2.3 Is Emptiness Soteriological?

How can emptiness be both the way things are and the goal of the path? Since the concept of emptiness is ontological, how can it also function as a soteriological concept? *Prima facia* it would seem to have to be either one or the other—either emptiness is reality or it is the goal of practice, but it can't be both.[101] If reality is the goal, then, since the goal would be already accomplished, there would be no need for practice. Or, in the stock Indian Buddhist formulation we encountered

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[100] *gser phreng*, 340: *dri ma zad med skye med kyang lugs phyi ma 'di'i khyad chos yin pas 'di ltar na spang bya rang bzhin med par shes pa tsam la spangs pa'i tha snyad 'dogs kyi spang gnyen rdzas tha dad dubden par mi 'dod de / sgyu ma'i glang pos sgyu ma'i glang po gzhan zhig pham par byas pa ltar 'dod pas so.*

[101] This difficulty was not lost on Tibetan scholars, eventually leading Tsongkhapa's later interpreter, Sonam Drakpa, to make his notorious distinction between ultimate truth (*don dam bden pa*) and emptiness (*stong nyid*), thereby allowing him to hold on to Candrakīrti's claim that nirvāṇa is the former while preserving the latter as a strictly ontological concept (*zab don gsal ba'i sgron me*, 78 & 79).

in the previous chapter, there would be the "unwanted consequence of being liberated without effort" (*ayatnenaiva mokṣaprasaṅga*).[102]

Not only is the claim that emptiness is nirvāṇa philosophically perplexing, there is also considerable textual evidence that, for Mādhyamikas, "nirvāṇa" becomes an ontological concept stripped of its soteriological meaning. So, it might plausibly seem that what has happened in Madhyamaka is that "nirvāṇa" has been transmuted into an ontological term, not that emptiness has somehow mysteriously taken on a soteriological dimension. In fact, reading Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti, one would be forgiven for thinking they are simply using the word "nirvāṇa" as a synonym for emptiness, without any soteriological implications whatsoever.[103] After all, they seem to use the same language to describe ultimate truth and their version of nirvāṇa—both are just the pacification of all fabrication.[104] While I am about to show that this is not quite accurate, there is an important sense in which nirvāṇa and emptiness are philosophically indistinguishable, and their terms are used interchangeably.[105] So much so that the term "natural nirvāṇa" (*rang bzhin gyi mya ngan las 'das pa*) is eventually used to distinguish this ontological nirvāṇa from the soteriological *summum bonum* of the Buddhist path.[106]

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[102] E.g. PsP, 527.

[103] Salvini has taken the opposite tactic for making sense of Candrakīrti's apparent blurring of any distinction between emptiness and nirvāṇa, arguing:

> In this specific context Candrakīrti equates emptiness with *nirvāṇa*, through an approximation/transfer (*upacāra*) wherein the cause takes the name of its effect ("Etymologies of What Can(Not) Be Said: Candrakīrti on Conventions and Elaborations," 679).

[104] For their "definition" (*lakṣaṇa*) of ultimate truth, see MMK 18.9 and PsP, 373; for nirvāṇa, see MMK 25.3 and PsP 521.

[105] Tibetan commentators such as Drakpa Gyaltsan, for instance, in certain contexts, even state that the terms nirvāṇa (*mya ngan las 'das pa*) and ultimate truth (*don dam pa'i bden pa*) are synonymous (*ming gi rnam grangs*) (*ljong shing*, 85).

[106] Although the term "*rang bzhin gyi mya ngan las 'das pa*" does occur in Indian texts (Toh 4019 F.244b), its explicit enumeration as synonym for emptiness is typical of Tibetan discussions of nirvāṇa (e.g. *rol mtsho*, ka 64). I have borrowed the term "ontological nirvāṇa" from MacDonald ("Knowing Nothing," 164). As for why it is called

In fact, however, seeing nirvāṇa as emptiness does not mark a shift away from the soteriological to the ontological but, rather, a rethinking of how freedom occurs. Confining myself now just to Candrakīrti, it is clear that nirvāṇa, even the "real" nirvāṇa which is a pacification of conceptualization indistinguishable from emptiness, is something that, at least at some level, we *attain* as the result of the path. In the PsP, when glossing the MMK verse quoted above that the uneliminated and unobtained is unceased unarisen nirvāṇa, he writes:

> As long as such concepts (*kalpanā*) function, there is no attainment (*adhigama*) of nirvāṇa, since the attainment of that [nirvāṇa] only results from the destruction (*parikṣaya*) of all fabrication (*prapañca*).[107]

That said, since *adhigama*, what I have translated as "attain," can also mean "know," what is to say that we shouldn't read the passage in purely epistemic terms, according to which concepts inhibit the understanding of nirvāṇa qua emptiness?

In his *Madhyamakāvatārabhāṣya* Candrakīrti puts a finer point on it. In the context of showing how the Four Noble Truths are incapsulated by the Two Truths, he writes:

> Regarding [these four], the Truth of Suffering, Origins, and the Path are situated in conventional truth (*saṃvṛtisatya*). The Truth of Cessation (*nirodhasatya*) is by nature an ultimate truth (*paramārthasatya*).[108]

That our suffering, its causes, and the path to getting rid of those causes are conventions sounds like typical Madhyamaka language; what is crucial for my point is his insistence that cessation, what the path leads to, is an ultimate truth. So it would seem that, according to the view he offers

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"natural nirvāṇa," Shakya Chokden writes that it is because it is the nature (*rang bzhin*) of phenomena, that it is called "natural;" and Sonam Drakpa explains that it is because it has gone beyond (*'das*) the "suffering" of true existence (*bden grub*) that it is "nirvāṇa" (*rol mtsho*, ka 64; *phar phyin spyi don*, 27). See also Sponberg's discussion of the four-fold nirvāṇa typology in the *Ch'eng-wei-shih-lun* (Sponberg, "Dynamic Liberation in Yogācāra Buddhism," 51).

[107] PsP, 522: *yāvaddhi etāḥ kalpanāḥ pravartante, tāvan nāsti nirvāṇādhigamaḥ, sarvaprapañcaparikṣayād eva tadadhigamāt*.

[108] MABh(X), 67: *tatra saṃvṛtisatyāntargatāni duḥkhasamudayamārgasatyāni / paramārthasatyasvarūpam nirodhasatyaṃ.*

here in the MAB, the term "nirvāṇa" also functions as a soteriological concept that he wholeheartedly embraces.[109] What remains unclear, however, is how. If cessation is an ultimate truth which is ontologically ever-present, how is it supposed to be meaningfully connected to the Truth of the Path? If nirvāṇa is the freedom from suffering which never existed in the first place, how is it supposed to be "attained" (*adhigama*)?

This is where Tibetan thinkers contribute a great deal. To fully appreciate what they bring to this question, however, first we need to see how emptiness, particularly the emptiness of our minds, can have "stains" (*dri ma*)*,* where "stains" serves as a metaphor for what keeps us from being the perfected awakened creatures we naturally are.[110] Talk of stains and talk of cleansing or purifying go together—when something has stains it makes sense to speak of purifying it.[111] But then what sense does it make to say that the emptiness of our minds has stains which need to be purified? Dishes and digestive tracts are cleansed, clothes are washed, perhaps people are purified, but emptiness?

To see what it means to say that emptiness is purified, let us start with the favorite Buddhist example of someone with myodesopsia (*taimirika*) who misperceives clumps in the eye's vitreous fluid as hairs, flies, and so forth. Even though this example involves two perspectives, the deluded perspective of the person with the eye condition and the correct perspective of someone with

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[109] Now what makes things a bit more complicated is that, in his YṢV, Candrakīrti distances himself from the claim that cessation is an ultimate truth, explaining that it is just called that because, in worldly terminology (*'jig rten gyi tha snyad*), it is non-deceptive (*mi slu ba*) (YṢV, 36). As the immediate context makes clear, however, in this section of the YṢV, he is talking about nirvāṇa as a cessation of conditioning, only switching to the perspective in which emptiness is called nirvāṇa in the following sections (YṢV, 37).

[110] See Vose for a brief but insightful discussion of Drakpa Gyaltsan's views of nirvāṇa (*Resurrecting Candrakīrti: Disputes in the Tibetan Creation of Prasāṇgika*, 58).

[111] To this point, Tibetan thinkers invariably quote the second verse of the *Dharmadhātustava*, albeit to very different ends. For Tibetan uses of this verse, see Shakya Chokden's commentary (*bstod pa rnam bshad*, 249) but also *dgong pa rab bsal* (139). For a discussion of authorship, see Brunnhölzl, *In Praise of Dharmadhātu*, 23.

healthy eyes, there is only one reality—there were never any hairs, no matter how it may have seemed. Now, when the person with myodesopsia looks out the window only to see hairs floating in the sky, even though the reality is hairless, from his perspective that reality is obscured or, if I may, "stained" by his perception of hairs.

So too the emptiness of our minds. Even though, in reality, my mind is unfindable, ungraspable, unborn, and unceasing, without the concepts of mental content, neurosis, sanity, *kleśa* or virtues, when I introspect on my experience that is precisely the sort of stuff my mind seems rife with. The unruffled unborn reality of my experience is obscured or stained by my concepts. This is the sense in which we can meaningfully talk about emptiness needing purification. And, crucially, at least from Tibetan commentarial perspectives, this is the sense in which the Mādhyamika's empty nirvāṇa is also the goal of practice. As soon as we stop the reification (*bden par 'dzin pa*) and fixation (*mtshan mar 'dzin pa*) of our experience, the empty ungraspable nature of our mind is nirvāṇa.

2.4. Unanswered Questions

To see just how far we have come, let us go back to Vatsagotra's question from the previous chapter. The way that Vasubandhu told the story, the problem with Vatsagotra's question is that, since he was assuming there was a Self, no matter whether the Buddha answered affirmatively or negatively, Vatsagotra would have taken this to mean that there is a Tathāgata existing independently of the aggregates—he would have concluded that either this autonomous Tathāgata does not survive death or that he does. What I tried to show in the previous chapter is that, even without the misprisions of personal identity, at the crux of Vatsagotra's doubt was whether this so-called "nirvāṇa" was a something or a nothing, perdurance or extinction.

Now it is time to reconsider why Vatsagotra's question could not be answered, this time through a Madhyamaka lens. As it turns, Nāgārjuna takes the Buddha's refusal to answer Vatsagotra's question as the final word on the goal and purpose of the Buddhist path:[112]

> It is not to be asserted that the Buddha exists beyond cessation, nor "does not exist" nor "both exists and does not exist," nor "neither exists nor does not exist"—none of these it to be asserted.[113]

Although so far this should feel fairly familiar in so far as all of the various logical options are refused, what changes is that Nāgārjuna goes on in the next verse to extend this point to the Tathāgata *before* death:

> Indeed it is not to be asserted that "The Buddha exists while remaining [in the world]," nor "does not exist" nor "both exists and does not exist," nor "neither exists nor does not exist"—none of these is to be asserted.[114]

By extending the Buddha's silence to the question of whether there is a Tathāgata at all, Nāgārjuna points to how Vatsagotra's mistake ran deeper than simply assuming a Self, and was more general than any particular question of postmortem survival. Since affirmation and denial, conceptualization in any form, are the problem, the Buddha remains silent.[115]

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[112] For a subtle reflection on just how much silence says, see Garfield, *Engaging Buddhism: Why It Matters to Philosophy*, 254 ff.

[113] MMK 25.17: *paraṃ nirodhād bhagavān bhavatīty eva nājyate / na bhavaty ubhayaṃ ceti nobhayaṃ ceti nājyate*. Translation by Siderits and Katsura, *Nāgārjuna's Middle Way:* Mulamadhyamakakārikā, 301. Note that the translation and the Sanskrit I provide reflect R's √ *añj*, "to distinguish or clarify" (R 246), as opposed to LVP (534) which reads √ *ūh*, "to conceive." R also appears to be corroborated by the Tibetan *mngon pa* (Toh 3860 F.179b). Note, however, that in his commentary to MMK 25.18 (PsP 535), Candrakīrti uses √ *ūh* to gloss √ *añj*, suggesting that, whatever the original may have been, for him the meanings of the terms were not far apart, although this gloss is absent in Tibetan (D F.179b).

[114] MMK 25.18: *tiṣṭhamāno 'pi bhagavān bhavatīty eva nājyate / na bhavaty ubhayaṃ ceti nobhayaṃ ceti nājyate.* Translation by Siderits and Katsura, 301. Again, the Sanskrit and translation here reflect R (246) as mentioned in the footnote above.

[115] An alternative interpretation is to see Nāgārjuna's point here as a rejection of bad premises—since all of the options presuppose metaphysical realism, all of the options must be rejected (Siderits and Garfield, "Defending the Semantic Interpretation: A Reply to Ferraro," 658). For a more in-depth discussion refer back to Chapter Two §1.

Most important for our inquiry, the point here is that not answering these questions is the Mādhyamikas own final account of nirvāṇa. In his commentary to Nāgārjuna's discussion of the unanswered questions, Candrakīrti tells us that, rather than leaving Vatsagotra's soteriological query behind, here not answering is what clears the path to nirvāṇa:

> If [what is under discussion] does not have the nature of being a real thing, the fourteen unanswered (*avyākṛta*) topics do not make sense. But, someone who has superimposed the nature of being a real thing [onto these topics], develops and becomes fixated on these views concerning whether or not [the item under discussion] goes away or not. It is to be understood that, for such a one, this grasping blocks the path leading to the city of nirvāṇa and fastens one to samsaric suffering.[116]

To put the same point in the particular terms of Vatsagotra's worry about what happens to the Tathāgata after death, if you think that nirvāṇa is this way or that way, a negation or something more than a negation, you will have caught yourself in views, locking the door to nirvāṇa.

At this point in the commentary, Candrakīrti introduces the objection that, if the Mādhyamikas had their way, since they have negated nirvāṇa, there would be no point for the Buddha to teach the dharma. The next verse of the MMK is then supposed to be Nāgārjuna's reply:

> Peace (*śiva*) is the calming of all perception (*sarvopalambhopaśama*), the calming of fabrication: no dharma has been taught by the Buddha for anyone anywhere.[117]

Not only is the state of the Tathāgata before and after final nirvāṇa neither to be affirmed or denied, as we have already seen, at this level of analysis, nothing can be said: the Buddha never taught the dharma anywhere to anyone.

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[116] PsP, 537: *caturdaśāpy etāni avyākṛtavastūni asati bhāvasvarūpe naiva yujyante / yas tu bhāvasvarūpam adhyāropya tadvigamāvigamataḥ etā dṛṣṭīrutpādya abhiniviśate, tasyāyamabhiniveśo nirvāṇapuragāminaṃ panthānaṃ niruṇaddhi, sāṃsārikeṣu ca duḥkheṣu niyojayatīti vijñeyam.*

[117] MMK 25.24: *sarvopalambhopaśamaḥ prapañcopaśamaḥ śivaḥ / na kva cit kasyacit kaścid dharmo buddhena deśitaḥ.* Translation by John Dunne, unpublished manuscript.

While some of this is familiar stuff from Madhyamaka dialectics, Candrakīrti does not simply draw on the view of emptiness to upend the opponent's objection; he shows that nirvāṇa lies right there in this apophatic non-affirmation of any view we might have of nirvāṇa. Replying now in his own words to the opponent's objection that Mādhyamikas have even negated nirvāṇa:

> Nirvāṇa is the calming (*upaśama*) or non-engagement (*apravṛtti*) with all fabrications or referents (*nimitta*). And, since that calming is naturally pacified (*upaśānta*), it is peace (*śiva*).[118]

The point here is that the unanswered questions, letting go of the view of nirvāṇa as either a positive entity or a negation, itself amounts to the Mādhyamika's own final account of the goal of Buddhist practice. For Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti, the lack of an answer itself constitutes an account of nirvāṇa—not answering is the answer. Liberation or nirvāṇa is when we stop thinking of existence and nonexistence, affirmation, and denial.

When viewed through this Madhyamaka lens, however, the modernist's empirical version of the Buddha's silence we discussed in the last chapter now appears in an odd light. While there is something admirable about the empirically disciplined Buddha who refuses to speculate about postmortem states because, unlike the next several thousand years of commentators, he knows the limits of his knowledge, we should ask, 'what does his silence do'? It keeps us from the supernatural, the spurious, the speculative, the metaphysically spooky. We can thank this Buddha of the modernist imagination for that but, we should also ask, 'how does it compare to the liberating silence of Nāgārjuna's Buddha'?

[118] PsP 538: *iha hi sarveṣāṃ prapañcānāṃ nimittānāṃ ya upaśamo 'pravṛttis tan nirvāṇam / sa eva copaśamaḥ prakṛtyaivopaśāntatvāc chivaḥ.*

3. Conclusion

As we discussed in the Introduction, our overarching question is about what it means to get rid of suffering—is it an immanent internal transformation or a transcendence of this body and life? There I argued that this usual back and forth proceeds as if it were self-evident that this question is supposed to be answered in the usual way, oblivious to the deeper question of whether, in fact, the solution is to let go of the idea that there is suffering to be gotten rid of. Now, hopefully, you are in a position to see just how this is so: just as the Buddha cannot answer Vatsagotra's question about nirvāṇa because any answer would just be more conceptualization, so too with the question of suffering, although we will have to wait until the next chapter to consider this point in the detail it demands.

We are now in a position to see more clearly why there might be something nonsensical about naturalizing Buddhist soteriological concepts. If Mādhyamikas are to be believed, the elimination of suffering or nirvāṇa cannot be understood in a naturalistic framework precisely because, according to such a framework, there is suffering to be gotten rid of. Returning to the way I put in the Introduction, the problem can be put as follows:

> 1) If there is such a thing as suffering, there is no elimination of suffering.
> 2) Within a naturalistic framework, there is such a thing as suffering.
> *Therefore*,
> 3) Within a naturalistic framework, there is no elimination of suffering.

Premise one should already be a bit clearer, although we will look at how Mādhyamikas make this point more explicitly in the next chapter. A more concrete way of understanding the second premise is in terms of the naturalist's effort to translate soteriological concepts into psychological ones.[119] If the lens through which you are interpretating Buddhist soteriology construes nirvāṇa as

[119] Thompson, *Why I Am Not a Buddhist*, 80.

a mental state that might be operationalized and studied empirically, it is difficult to see how, through such a lens, the Mādhyamika denial of suffering would be intelligible.

Now, the Mādhyamika's own analysis opens up an obvious but important objection to what I am saying: No matter how antirealist your reading of Candrakīrti, for him, there are always two levels of analysis: the ultimate level of analysis in which nothing is found—not suffering nor, as we saw, its absence; and then, crucially, a conventional perspective in which our ordinary distinctions are kept as the only one's worth keeping. Since, conventionally speaking, up and down, left and right, suffering and happiness are all perfectly intelligible, supposing Buddhist naturalists want to take on the corrective insights of Madhyamaka analysis, all they need to do is clarify that their naturalistic framework is intended as a reformation of our conventions. As such, all they are saddled with is the undeniably obvious claim that, conventionally speaking, there is suffering to be gotten rid of.

What should already be clear by now, however, is that the Mādhyamika's whole point is that it is at this ultimate level of analysis that we find freedom from suffering. This naturalized approach would make sense if Mādhyamikas held their view of emptiness in one hand and nirvāṇa with the other, connected only by a distal string of causes—seeing emptiness eliminates grasping which leads to nirvāṇa. If that were the case, there would, indeed, be more room to naturalize nirvāṇa without running afoul of emptiness. Although, admittedly, there are times when Indian and Tibetan Mādhyamikas make it sound that way, construing it so misses the point that Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti are hammering home—that emptiness is nirvāṇa.[120] Or, in other words, their point is that it is at this ultimate level of analysis that freedom from suffering becomes possible. *This* is where the attempt to naturalize Buddhist soteriological concepts runs afoul—at the level of

[120] Consider, for example, MMK 18.5 and PsP 350.

analysis that Madhyamaka soteriological concepts are pointing, there is no suffering, no mental states, no naturalistic framework.

In the next part of this study we will return to clarify this point through reflecting on immanent and transcendent ways of thinking about the elimination of suffering. Although we now have the rough contours of how and why the problem of suffering is or not "solved," it is still not clear what constitutes this freedom from suffering. Going back to our original perplexity, are we to see freedom from suffering as a transcendence of saṃsāra? If so, what is it that is transcended and, most perplexing of all, what does "transcendence" even mean? Our task for the next chapter will be to flesh out more clearly and concretely just how Buddhist philosophers, Mādhyamikas most of all, understood this freedom from suffering.

IV. Transcendence

After the Buddha attained what would come to be called "nirvāṇa" under the bodhi tree early one morning, he is said to have hung around for another seven weeks, alone, in silence. When he did first speak, according to the narrative in the *Lalitavistara Sūtra*, what he said of this nirvāṇa is this:

> Profound (*gambhīra*), peaceful (*śānta*), immaculate (*virajaḥ*), luminous (*prabhāsvaraḥ*)—the dharma I have understood is deathless (*amṛta*) and unconditioned (*asaṃskṛta*). Were I to teach it to someone else, they would not understand. Now I will remain silently in the forest.[1]

We will get to what this all means but, to do that, we need to ask in what sense this is supposed to be freedom. The *Lalitavistara Sūtra* tells us this much:

> Having cleared the turbid darkness of confusion (*moha*),
> filled with views, arrogance and hatred,
> here, what has long been dark
> is illuminated by the sun of wisdom.
>
> Here, with the boat of enthusiasm,
> I have crossed (*saṃtīrṇa*) the ocean of saṃsāra,
> With its crocodiles of desire and attachment, waves of craving,
> And grasping at wrong views.[2]

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[1] LV, 25.1: *gambhīra śānto virajaḥ prabhāsvaraḥ prāpto mi dharmo hy amṛto 'saṃskṛtaḥ / deśeya cāhaṃ na paraś ca jāne yan nūna tūṣṇīṃ pavane vaseyam.*

[2] LV, 24.47-48: *iha mohatamaḥkaluṣaṃ duṣṭīkṛtadarparoṣasaṃkīrṇam /*
bhittvā cirāndhakāraṃ prabhāsitaṃ jñānasūryeṇa.

iha rāgamadanamakaraṃ tṛṣṇormijalaṃ kudṛṣṭyasaṃgrāham (*kudṛṣṭisaṃgrāham*) /
saṃsārasāgaram ahaṃ saṃtīrṇo vīryabalanāvā.

My translation "grasping at wrong views" reflects *kudṛṣṭisaṃgrāham*, as found in Lefmann (p. 374), not Hokazono's otherwise preferable edition, which reads *kudṛṣṭyasaṃgrāham* (p. 292). In the face of these manuscript issues, in which neither version is altogether satisfactory, it is tempting to instead follow the Tibetan translation (*ngar 'dzin lta ngan*): "grasping at a self and wrong views" (Toh 95, F.195a). Since a *-ha* may easily have been mistaken for a *-sa*, the Tibetan translation suggests an original "*kudṛṣṭyahaṃgraham*."

Bereft of any awakened insight of our own, with only the benefit of a couple thousand years of commentary, how are we to understand the Buddha's achievement? The first verse suggests it was an immanent internal transformation, a dispelling of confusion's darkness, but our question begins with the second verse: what does it mean to say that upon awakening the Buddha transcended or crossed the ocean of saṃsāra?

We began our inquiry poised between two possibilities—either the elimination of suffering is an immanent psychological transformation, or it is transcendence of our conditioned finite existence. Thus far, over the course of the last three chapters, however, we have seen how the very notion that there is suffering to be eliminated is itself a controversial starting point. While this certainly seemed to be Vasubandhu's starting point in the *Kośa*, in the last chapter we saw how, from Candrakīrti's perspective, nirvāṇa is best understood as the absence of there ever having been suffering in the first place, not as an elimination wrought through paths and practices.

In this chapter, equipped with everything we have learned from Vasubandhu and Candrakīrti, we shall return to our initial perplexity about whether freedom from suffering is a transcendence of conditioning. In so doing, we shall end up with an altogether different sense of what constitutes transcendence in the context of Buddhist philosophical texts, and we shall have a far clearer sense of just what it means when Mādhyamikas say that you get rid of suffering by realizing you don't have any. More specifically, our task is to understand what it means to say that nirvāṇa is transcendent. A transcendence of what? Negative attitudes, emotional hang-ups, and other psychological short comings, or embodied existence altogether? And what does it even mean to "transcend" something anyway?

For discussions of LV manuscripts and editions, see De Jong, "Recent Japanese Studies on the Lalitavistara"; Silk, "Serious Play: Recent Scholarship on the *Lalitavistara*," 272 ff. For an alternative translation, see Dharmachakra Translation Committee, *The Play in Full*, 24.50-24.51.

Old though these questions may be, they are now at the crux of whether Buddhist doctrine is to be naturalized and its path secularized. For Buddhist naturalists and secular Buddhists, transcendence is to be avoided at all costs: attaining nirvāṇa means developing a certain psychological state or achieving a certain 'know-how;' not the transcendence of this life, this body, and the all-pervasive suffering of existence. Their intuition that the goal of Buddhist practice can and should be an immanent psychologically credible sort of nirvāṇa gives life to their conception of the Buddhist path. The corollary of this immanent intuition is that the newer, better, Buddhism suited for our modern times, "Buddhism 2.0," should *not* be oriented around a transcendent nirvāṇa beyond this life.[3]

Nirvāṇa is "freedom" (*mokṣa*) or, in Abhidharma terms, "separation" (v*isaṃyoga*), so it makes sense that, in Buddhist texts, transcendence is to be understood as a freedom from something.[4] On the one hand, we can think of nirvāṇa as an immanent freedom from *kleśa*, whereas, on the other, we can think of it as a transcendent freedom from saṃsāra or the aggregates. Whether attaining nirvāṇa is transcendence is really a question of *what* nirvāṇa is free from, and *how* so. Our inquiry will therefore proceed along these two axis: what is nirvāṇa free from? And, what does "free from" mean?

But then why bring immanence and transcendence into it at all? Since these terms are confusing and muddled enough in our contemporary context, why muddy the waters by using them as analytic concepts for interpreting premodern Buddhist texts? Using the term exposes how much Buddhist texts have to say to our contemporary worries about transcendence. Unsurprisingly, there is no term in Buddhist texts that fully captures our distinction between immanence and

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[3] Batchelor, *Secular Buddhism: Imagining the Dharma in an Uncertain World*, 80; Gleig, *American Dharma: Buddhism beyond Modernity*, 267.

[4] AK 4.127 and AKbh 92.

transcendence; its vicissitudes and tensions are inextricably modern and do not, in any obvious way, mirror anything in Buddhist texts.[5] At the same time, however, canonical and contemporary discussions of nirvāṇa intersect around the question of whether attaining nirvāṇa is immanent, in the sense of being achieved here and now, in this life, or transcendent, in the sense of leaving behind this life and ordinary embodied existence. It is in this restricted domain that my inquiry into immanent and transcendent nirvāṇa proceeds.[6] My point is that the term "transcendence" conveys implications in both directions—yes, using the term in the context of reading Buddhist texts risks bringing unacknowledged assumptions with us, but using the term also conveys the implications these premodern reflections have for contemporary debates around what to do with transcendence.

1. Transcendence of What?

In even the earliest scriptures, psychological descriptions of nirvāṇa as an immanent freedom from hatred, attachment, and ignorance occur alongside descriptions of it as a transcendent release from birth and death.[7] As commentators reflected on and systematized conflicting descriptions of the

[5] Bernstein, "The Uneasy Tensions of Immanence and Transcendence"; Schoenberg, "Transcendence and Transformation: Charles Taylor and the Promise of Inclusive Humanism in a Secular Age"; Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 9 & 20.

[6] For good examples of using immanence and/or transcendence to successfully unpack Buddhist soteriological concepts, see Dunne, "Thoughtless Buddha, Passionate Buddha," 525; Schmidt-Leukel, "Nirvāṇa as 'Unconditioned' (*Asaṃskṛta*) and 'Transcendent' (*Lokottara*) Reality"; Gimello, "The 'Entangled' Presence of the Unconditioned"; McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 155; Thompson, *Why I Am Not a Buddhist*, 81. For further discussion, note that Röllicke argues against importing the concept of transcendence to interpret Buddhist texts ("Considerations on the Inappropriateness of the 'Transcendence' Paradigm to the Hermeneutics of Buddhist Scriptures") whereas Schmidt-Leukel offers a cogent discussion of why nirvāṇa ought to be understood as "transcendent," which he sees as equivalent to *lokottara* (Pali *lokuttara*) ("Nirvāṇa as 'Unconditioned' (*Asaṃskṛta*) and 'Transcendent' (*Lokottara*) Reality," 90).

[7] SN iv, 251. See Vetter, *The Ideas and Meditative Practices of Early Buddhism*, 15.

Buddha's nirvāṇa, they eventually distinguished two sorts:[8] one an immanent internal transformation achieved here in this life, called *sopadhiśeṣa-nirvāṇa,* or "nirvāṇa with the remainder of the psycho-physical aggregates."[9] The other a radical transcendence of existence (*bhava*), called *nirupadhiśeṣa-nirvāṇa* or "nirvāṇa without the remainder of the aggregates."[10] Even though this *sopadhi-nirupadhi* distinction was characteristic of early Nikāya Buddhism, eventually superseded in Mahāyāna texts by the non-abiding nirvāṇa (*apratiṣṭhita-nirvāṇa*) I discuss in the next chapter, it remained the backbone of classical reflections on immanence and transcendence and the target of later soteriological critique.[11] *Sopadhiśeṣa-nirvāṇa* is likened to a village in which the bandits have been destroyed, whereas *nirupadhiśeṣa-nirvāṇa* is like the destruction of even the village where they once were.[12] While *sopadhiśeṣa-nirvāṇa* is achieved

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[8] Note that although Bronkhorst sees the distinction as a way of reconciling the earlier idea of nirvāṇa in this life with the later idea of nirvāṇa after death, Vetter locates both notions in the earliest canonical material (Bronkhorst, *The Two Traditions of Meditation in Ancient India*, 95; Vetter, *The Ideas and Meditative Practices of Early Buddhism*, 16 fn.5).

[9] Here "aggregates" translates "*upadhi*" (not "*skandha*"), a term whose meaning is much debated (Vetter, *The Ideas and Meditative Practices of Early Buddhism*, 16; Harvey, *The Selfless Mind: Personality, Consciousness and Nirvana in Early Buddhism*, 182; Hwang, *Metaphor and Literalism in Buddhism: The Doctrinal History of Nirvana*, ch.2; Bronkhorst, *The Two Traditions of Meditation in Ancient India*, 72). According to the etymology he provides, for Candrakīrti, *upadhi* has the sense of a foundation since it is that upon which self-love (*ātmasneha*) is founded (*upadhā*). He goes on to say that, since this is precisely the role of the five appropriated (*upādāna*) aggregates, they are what is meant by the term (PsP, 519; Hwang, *Metaphor and Literalism in Buddhism: The Doctrinal History of Nirvana*, 49).

[10] Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities: Utopias of the Pali Imaginaire*, 147; Harvey, *The Selfless Mind: Personality, Consciousness and Nirvana in Early Buddhism*, 180; Hwang, *Metaphor and Literalism in Buddhism: The Doctrinal History of Nirvana*, 14; Gowans, *Philosophy of the Buddha*, 136.

[11] Not only is it the case that, as we shall see, Bhāviveka and Candrakīrti target this distinction, *sopadhi-nirupadhi* continued to be crucial for Mahāyāna conceptions of a three-fold path structure (*śrāvaka*, *pratyekabuddha*, and *bodhisattva*) (AAsa, 4) even in later Tibetan commentaries (e.g. *gser phren, i,* 53; *rol mtsho, ka,* 64; *yum don rab gsal,* 27; *phar phyin spyi don*, 27).

Note that Steven Collins has objected to the notion that Mahāyāna replaces a "negative" construal of nirvāṇa with the positive goal of the Bodhisattva, apparently on the grounds that since nirvāṇa is no longer the goal, Mahāyāna is not replacing one notion of nirvāṇa with another so much as it is doing something altogether different (*Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities: Utopias of the Pali Imaginaire*, 101). If his point is one of nomenclature, it is not true that Mahāyāna dispenses with nirvāṇa (as should be clear by now, the concept is of central importance for Mahāyāna philosophers such as Candrakīrti (see for example PsP, 4). If his point is that the meaning of nirvāṇa has changed, on the other hand, that seems to be precisely the point of the position to which he is objecting.

[12] PsP, 519.

here in saṃsāra, *nirupadhiśeṣa-nirvāṇa* is the elimination of the psycho-physical aggregates and their beginningless cycling from death to birth. If we are to answer the question of what nirvāṇa is free from with any precision, taking this distinction seriously must be our starting point.

Rather than view immanence and transcendence as conflicting goals, Buddhist commentators understood them as occurring sequentially: first we attain *sopadhiśeṣa*, an immanent nirvāṇa, achieved upon eliminating the inner bandits of *kleśa*, experienced here in this body while we are still breathing, embodied, and possessed of five aggregates. Then, after death, like destroying the village itself, we would attain *nirupadhiśeṣa-nirvāṇa*, a transcendence in which no aggregates remain. The initial immanent nirvāṇa guarantees our posthumous transcendence, since it is by virtue of this internal transformation or cleansing that we no longer have the kleśa for taking another birth.

1.1. Modern Immanence

Carried by the chorus of our times, which tells us that the good is to be found in human flourishing, it is profoundly intuitive for us that any notion of nirvāṇa worth seeking would be an immanent and largely psychological transformation, not a transcendence of human well-being altogether.[13] So intuitive, in fact, that it takes enormous philosophical work, or a great stretch of the imagination, to even contemplate seeking such transcendence.[14] That notwithstanding, however, as scholars

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[13] Taylor puts the point this way:

> Now the point of bringing out this distinction between human flourishing and goals which go beyond it is this. I would like to claim that the coming of modern secularity in my sense has been coterminous with the rise of a society in which for the first time in history a purely self-sufficient humanism came to be a widely available option. I mean by this a humanism accepting no final goals beyond human flourishing, nor any allegiance to anything else beyond this flourishing. Of no previous society was this true (*A Secular Age*, 18).

[14] Taylor, 543; Schoenberg, "Transcendence and Transformation: Charles Taylor and the Promise of Inclusive Humanism in a Secular Age," 57.

within Buddhist studies become increasingly aware of the danger in replacing what one finds in Buddhist texts with what one would like to find, naturalistic reconstructions of the Buddha's teaching have given way to more sober acknowledgments of the place of transcendence in Buddhist thought. The outcome of this is that scholars good at reading Buddhist texts steer clear of their own immanent predilections, and seekers of spiritual immanence fare poorly as interpreters of Buddhism.

It is in this no-man's-land between the barricades of philological rigor and what most of us really believe that popular Buddhist interpreters like Stephen Batchelor and Robert Wright take on a surprising significance. Since their interpretations are, at some points, exegetically absurd and, at other points, philosophically one-dimensional, under any other circumstance, they are figures we might safely have ignored. As it stands, however, they have accomplished something academic philosophers of Buddhism would never try and proponents of traditional Buddhism would never succeed in—they have forged a Buddhist path in tune with our contemporary immanent intuitions. A philosophical coming to terms with Buddhist soteriology starts with them.

Their secular Buddhist path leads to a nirvāṇa that is now construed as a purely immanent psychological achievement that optimizes flourishing. What the Buddha achieved under the bodhi tree was an insight that gave him the ability to live his life free from the control of hatred, attachment, and ignorance. As such, nirvāṇa is not an end in itself but rather a gateway to a brave new world where we can, for the first time, truly thrive. Attaining nirvāṇa gives us the ability to be present, to be aware of the delicious richness of our emotional lives and the beauty of our natural world.

This immanent nirvāṇa is defined by what it is not—the nirvāṇa waiting at the end of the secular path is *not* a transcendence of the 'here and now,' *not* an "escape to an absolute state apart

from the conditions of life."[15] Here we find the canonical *sopadhi-nirupadhi* distinction resurfacing in the secular and naturalized Buddhism of Batchelor, Wright, and others, as a way to distinguish the good (*sopadhi*) nirvāṇa we should seek from the outdated (*nirupadhi*) nirvāṇa we should ignore.[16] Take Batchelor's presentation of dueling nirvāṇas, for instance:

> From this orthodox perspective, the goal of our practice is the attainment of a final, transcendent nirvāṇa. A secular reading, however, treats rebirth as a metaphor for a repetitive existence in which we remain locked into cycles of reactive behavior. In this case, the goal of the practice is to stop thinking, speaking, and acting reactively, thereby liberating ourselves to respond to life unconditioned by such impulses. Instead of lying beyond the transient, suffering world, nirvāṇa is revealed to lie in the very heart of our own sentient experience here and now. These two conflicting interpretations of nirvāṇa yield very different understandings of what constitutes the good. For an orthodox Buddhist, the highest good is a transcendent state of nirvāṇa located beyond the conditioned world; for a non-orthodox, secular practitioner, the highest good is an eightfold path of human flourishing that springs from an immanent condition of nirvāṇa.[17]

Here we find immanent and transcendent conceptions of nirvāṇa in conflict. The Abhidharma view that immanence naturally segues into transcendence has given way to their polarization. *Sopadhi* and *nirupadhi* are not a sequential progression but, rather, a point of division, a crossroads at which each of us must choose our orientation.

1.2. Freedom from *Kleśa*

When Buddhist naturalists use the *sopadhi-nirupadhi* distinction to differentiate their immanent *nirvāṇa* from its transcendent counterpart, is their soteriology simply a matter of lopping off the transcendent, preserving intact traditional concepts of *sopadhiśeṣa-nirvāṇa*? No. Not all

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[15] Batchelor, *After Buddhism: Rethinking the Dharma for a Secular Age*, 145.

[16] Batchelor, 307; Flanagan, *The Bodhisattva's Brain: Buddhism Naturalized*, 22; Wright, *Why Buddhism Is True: The Science and Philosophy of Meditation and Enlightenment*, 218.

[17] Batchelor, *After Buddhism: Rethinking the Dharma for a Secular Age*, 307.

immanence is equal. And, unsurprisingly, the kinds of immanent soteriologies we find in Buddhist texts are altogether different from naturalized ones. Articulating just how so, however, will take some careful excavation of Buddhist concepts.

Let us start with a dialogue between the Buddha and an unnamed disciple, which is about as close as we will get to hearing immanence explained in the Buddha's words:[18]

> A certain mendicant (*bhikṣu dge slong*), having gotten up from his meditative seclusion (*nang du yang dag par 'jog pa ≈ pratisaṃlayana*), went to where the Buddha was. Having approached, he prostrated with the crown of his head to the Buddha's feet and sat to one side. Sitting to one side, he asked the Buddha the following question: "Lord, it is said of the mendicant who has attained *nirvāṇa* in the present (*dṛṣṭadharma*)[19] that 'he is a mendicant who has attained *nirvāṇa* in the present.' Lord, how is it that one becomes a mendicant who has attained *nirvāṇa* in the present? How is it that the Sugata applies the term 'a mendicant who has attained *nirvāṇa* in the present'?" The Bhagavan replied to the mendicant: "Mendicant, the question you ask [beginning with] 'it is said of the mendicant who has attained *nirvāṇa* in the present' up to 'applies the term,' is excellent, most excellent. Mendicant, as you ask, you must make effort. For this reason, mendicant, listen well, mentally focus, and I shall explain. When a mendicant, sick (*skyo ba*)[20] of form, without attachment towards it, [attachment] ceased (*'gog pa*), lives (*gnas*) with his mind liberated from defilement (*zag pa*) without any appropriation (*nye bar len pa*), one can call him 'a mendicant who has attained *nirvāṇa* in the present' When a mendicant, sick (*skyo ba*) of feeling (*tshor ba*), discrimination (*'du shes*), conditioned entities (*'du byed*), and consciousness (*rnam par shes pa*) without attachment, [attachment] ceased (*'gog pa*), lives (*gnas*) with his mind liberated from defilement (*zag pa*) without any appropriation (*nye bar len pa*), one can call him 'a mendicant who has attained *nirvāṇa* in the *present*.'[21]

[18] As has been my practice throughout, I refer to the speaker here as the "Buddha" in keeping with the assumptions and nomenclature of later commentators.

[19] Vasubandhu references this sūtra in his AKbh which provides the Sanskrit for the phrase "the mendicant who has attained *nirvāṇa* in the present (*dṛṣṭadharma*)" (AKbh, 93: *dṛṣṭadharmanirvāṇaprāpto bhikṣu*).

[20] *skyo ba*, what I am translating as "sick of," presumably is a rendering of *saṃvega.* While in other contexts, *saṃvega* would be better captured by "deeply moved," here the sense is more resolutely negative (Rotman, *Hungry Ghosts*, 50; Liang and Morseth, "Aesthetic Emotions: The Existential and Soteriological Value of *Saṃvega/Pasāda* in Early Buddhism"; Feinberg, "The Concept of Saṃvega (Distress) in Early Buddhist Scripture").

[21] Śamathadeva quotes this sūtra passage in full in his *Abhidharmakośopāyikā* (Toh 4094.1 F.97b), which survives only in Tibetan translation (Skilling and Harrison, "What's in a Name? Sarvåstivådin Interpretations of the Epithets 'Buddha' and 'Bhagavat," 131; Martini, "The 'Discourse on Accumulated Actions' in Śamathadeva's Abhidharmakośopāyikā," 49): *de nas dge slong gzhan zhig nang du yang dag 'jog las langs nas bcom ldan 'das gang na ba der nye bar song ste / nye bar song nas bcom ldan 'das kyi zhabs la spyi bos phyag byas te / phyogs gcig tu 'dug*

In this dialogue, we find a disciple asking the Buddha about his use of the striking phrase: "the mendicant who has attained *nirvāṇa* in the present (*dṛṣṭadharma*)." Although *dṛṣṭadharma*, which I am loosely translating as "the present," as in 'here and now' in this life, literally means a dharma or quality which is visible, the term is usually used in the sense of things you get in the here and now as opposed to fruits to be enjoyed in future lives.[22] The Buddha explains that he uses the phrase to mean a mendicant who lives without attachment, whose mind is freed from defilement, and so on. Since all of these qualities are simply general characterizations of *nirvāṇa*, what singles out "a mendicant who has attained *nirvāṇa* in the present" is the fact that such a mendicant lives (*gnas*) or "abides" in this state—*nirvāṇa* is part of his life here and now, not a state beyond this world or this life.

As this dialogue is gradually digested and absorbed into later philosophical reflections, the *nirvāṇa* of this mendicant comes to be explained as *sopadhiśeṣa*. Yaśomitrā (ca.7th century), one the *Kośa's* most influential Indian commentators, glosses this portion of the sūtra as follows:[23]

/ go phyogs gcig tu 'dug nas bcom ldan 'das la 'di skad ces gsol to / btsun pa dge slong mthong ba'i chos la mya ngan las 'das pa thob pa dge slong mthong ba'i chos la mya ngan las 'das pa thob pa zhes bya ba la / btsun pa ji tsam gyis na mthong ba'i chos la mya ngan las 'das pa thob pa'i dge slong du 'gyur / ji tsam gyis na bde bar gshegs pas mthong ba'i chos la mya ngan las 'das pa thob pa'i dge slong zhes tha snyad gdags pas btags / de skad ces gsol pa dang / bcom ldan 'das kyis dge slong de la 'di skad ces bka' stsal to / dge slong legs so legs so / dge slong khyod 'di lta bu'i dri ba 'dri ba mthong ba'i chos la mya ngan las 'das pa thob pa zhes bya ba nas snga ma bzhin du tha snyad btags so zhes bya ba'i bar du'o / dge slong khyod 'di lta bu 'dri 'am / btsun pa de bzhin no / de'i phyir dge slong legs par nyon la yid la zung shing dang bshad par bya'o / dge slong gzugs la skyo ba dang 'dod chags dang bral ba dang 'gog pa dang nye bar len pa med par zag pa dag las sems rnam par grol zhing gnas na mthong ba'i chos la mya ngan las 'das pa thob pa'i dge slong zhes brjod par nus so / tshor ba dang / 'du shes dang / 'du byed dang / rnam par shes pa la skyo ba dang 'dod chags dang bral ba dang / 'gog pa dang / nye bar len par dag las sems rnam par grol zhing gnas na mthong ba'i chos la mya ngan las 'das pa thob pa'i dge slong zhes brjod par nus to.

[22] This usage is illustrated in MMK 17.18, as well as, for instance, the following passage from the *Buddhakṣetra Nirdeśavyūha Sūtra* (Toh 98, F.266b):

> One will attain all the good qualities in the present (*mthong ba'i chos* ≈ *dṛṣṭadharma*) just as imagined and desired. (*des ni mthong ba'i chos la'ang yon tan kun / ji ltar bsams shing 'dod pas 'thob par 'gyur.*)

See also Kalupahana, *Causality—the Central Philosophy of Buddhism*, 179; Bronkhorst, *The Two Traditions of Meditation in Ancient India*, 73.

[23] For a historical discussion of Yaśomitrā, see Mejor, *Vasubandhu's* Abhidharmakośa *and the Commentaries Preserved in the Tanjur*, 38 ff.; for discussion of his dates, see Frauwallner, *On the Date of the Buddhist Master of the Law Vasubandhu*, 21 fn.1; De Jong, "The *Arthaviniścaya-Sūtra and Its Commentary (Nibandhana)*: Critically

> [The mendicant] who has obtained *nirvāṇa* in the present means someone living in *sopadhiśeṣa-nirvāṇa*.[24]

By tying this dialogue to *sopadhiśeṣa-nirvāṇa*, Yaśomitrā gives us the bare bones for what at least one version of a Buddhist immanent *nirvāṇa* might be.

For Buddhist philosophers, *sopadhiśeṣa-nirvāṇa* appears to be a psychological achievement in which delusions (*kleśa*) or mental dispositions (*anuśaya*) are eliminated.[25] Putting it this way, however, may sound suspiciously modern—after all, contemporary interpreters of Buddhism do tend to psychologize such concepts as karma and rebirth, changing cosmological explanations into psychological ones.[26] Buddhist modernists transform concepts traditionally understood as external or supernatural so that, instead, they exclusively refer to internal mental states (of the sort that what we find in modern psychology, i.e. pleasure, pain, anxiety, happiness). As McMahan has pointed out, *nirvāṇa* too has been psychologized in much the same way.[27] So it is that, in light of

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Edited and Annotated for Tjie First Time with Introdurtion and Several Indiœs," 117; Mejor, *Vasubandhu's* Abhidharmakośa *and the Commentaries Preserved in the Tanjur*, 41.

[24] SA, 221: *dṛṣtadharmanirvāṇaprāpta iti / sopadhiśeṣanirvāṇastha ity arthaḥ*. Although the Śāstri edition includes the helpful gloss "*in [this] immediately perceptible (pratyakṣa) life (janman)*" (SA(Śāstri), 258: *dṛṣtadharmanirvāṇaprāpta iti / pratyakṣe janmani nirvāṇaprāptaḥ sopadhiśeṣanirvāṇastha ity arthaḥ*), this is absent in the otherwise more reliable Wogihara edition (221), as well as in the Dege Tibetan translation (Toh 4092 F.209a4). Although more philological research is necessary, I suspect that the Wogihara and Dege reading is preferrable. For a brief discussion of the SA manuscript history, see Hanner, "Abhidharmakośabhāṣya (Treasury of Metaphysics with Self-Commentary)"; Mejor, *Vasubandhu's* Abhidharmakośa *and the Commentaries Preserved in the Tanjur*, 38 ff.

[25] Consider Collins' characterization of *nirvāṇa* as a psychological achievement: "The attainment of Arhantship is both a cognitive and an affective transformation: to realize selflessness is both to acquire and retain knowledge–perhaps better said, wisdom or understanding—and to achieve a condition of the heart and mind in which all dispositions and traits which are harmful (in Buddhist eyes) are eliminated" (*Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities: Utopias of the Pali Imaginaire*, 152). For a more partial psychological reading, see Kalupahana, *Causality—the Central Philosophy of Buddhism*, 180.

Note that talk of "eliminating" *kleśa* in fact more accurately captures Sautrāntika soteriology. For the Sarvāstivāda, in contrast, since entitles exist across time, abandoning *kleśa* means separating from them, not destroying them (Cox, "Attainment through Abandonment: The Sarvastivadin Path of Removing Defilements," 89).

[26] McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 45.

[27] McMahan, 272 fn.1.

our tendency to over psychologize Buddhist conceptions of *nirvāṇa*, initial skepticism towards interpreting *sopadhiśeṣa* in psychological terms is warranted.

Did Buddhist philosophers think *sopadhiśeṣa* was an internal psychological achievement? Here, in the context of modernist psychologizing of Buddhist concepts, "psychological" means not just internal but, more importantly, as opposed to the supernatural. When the six realms are psychologized, for instance, their supernatural dimension is eliminated through interpretating them purely in terms of internal *and* naturalized mental states.[28] Assuming, for the moment, that the Buddhist concepts of kleśa or mental dispositions (*anuśaya*) are psychological in this naturalistic sense, *sopadhiśeṣa* is a purely psychological achievement to that extent that *kleśa* and dispositions are all that is eliminated, and not also some supernatural entities.

The issue becomes clearer when we ask what a non-psychological interpretation of *sopadhiśeṣa* would look like. The short answer is that it would involve the elimination of karma. When the Buddha answered the question of why we suffer, he did not give a strictly psychological account—we suffer because of the conjunction of *kleśa* and karma.[29] Unlike *kleśa*, which are cognitive errors and dysfunctional emotions (all good material for an article in a psychology journal), the karma that ripens into future suffering fits poorly in a contemporary empirical framework. Here karma refers not just to action in general nor to the mental act of intention (*cetanā*) but, rather, to the non-cognitive residue from actions performed in previous lives.[30] Since the explanation for why we suffer is not purely psychological (insofar as it appeals to karma), it does not seem far-fetched to think that the elimination of suffering is more than a change of heart.

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[28] McMahan, 145.

[29] For a reflection on this question in the context of early Buddhism, see Schmithausen, "'Liberating Insight' and 'Enlightenment' in Early Buddhism," 208.

[30] This is evident in classical accounts of the Twelve-dependent links (e.g. MMK 26.1; PsP, 543).

In fact, however, Buddhist philosophers sought to isolate the psychological ingredient in our suffering as the thing to be eliminated. In the *Abhidharmakośa* and its later commentaries, the Arhat's initial attainment of *nirvāṇa*, what Yaśomitrā equates with *sopadhiśeṣa*, is a matter of getting rid of mental dispositions (*anuśaya*). Vasubandhu writes that these dispositions or *anuśaya* are the root of saṃsāra since they are essential for accumulating new karma and for past karma to have its effect.[31] Yaśomitrā puts a finer point on this when he writes:

> Also, without dispositions (*anuśaya*), karma which has already been produced (*kṛta*) is not able to produce future existence (*bhava*). For even though an Arhat does not lack the virtuous and non-virtuous indefinite karma, which makes for a future existence, accumulated when they were ordinary beings, because they are without dispositions, that karma is not able to produce an existence (*bhava*).[32]

We can think of this in terms of the twelve-links of dependent origination, in which a previous action only produces a future existence (*bhava*) when ripened by attachment. Yaśomitrā's point is that what sets Arhats apart from the rest of us has nothing to do with a transformation of their karma; rather, they are free because they've gotten rid of their mental dispositions.

Nor is this just one of those Abhidharma peculiarities. Elsewhere, in the Buddhist epistemological tradition, for instance, we find this same emphasis on a psychological solution. So it is that, in the *Pramāṇavārttika*, Dharmakīrti argues that the karma of those who have eliminated craving for existence (*bhavatṛṣṇā*) is insufficient for impelling (*ākṣepta*) future existence since they have eliminated its cooperative condition (*sahakārin*).[33] Dharmakīrti's point here is that to attain *nirvāṇa* all we need is to eliminate our psychological errors.

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[31] AK 5.1a, AKbh, 277.

[32] SA, 441: *yāni ca kṛtāni / tāny apy aṃtareṇānuśayāṃ bhavābhinirvartane na śaktāni bhavaṃti / na hy arhatāṃ pṛthagjanāvasthāyāṃ kṛtāni kuśalākuśalāni paunarbhavikāny aniyatāni karmāṇi na saṃti / anuśayavaikalyāt tu tāni bhavābhinirvartane na samarthāni.*

[33] PV 2.193-194ab. For a discussion of the relation between craving and future existence (*bhava*) according to Dharmakīrti, see Eltschinger ("Ignorance, Epistemology and Soteriology Part II," 39) as well as Pecchia (*Dharmakīrti on the Cessation of Suffering*).

In Tibetan commentarial literature, in typical fashion, this psychological emphasis was made polemically. Ar Jangchub Yeshe, an extraordinarily influential early commentator, set off a debate among Tibetan exegetes when he wrote that, according to the Abhidharma, *sopadhiśeṣa-nirvāṇa* is the elimination of suffering's origin (*samudaya)*, the second of the Four Noble Truths:[34]

> *sopadhiśeṣa* is the elimination of the cause, True Origins (*kun 'byung gi bden pa ≈ samudayasatya*), without being free of the effect, True Suffering (*sdug bsngal gyi bden pa ≈ duḥkhasatya*).[35]

At first blush, Ar's claim does seem to be insufficiently specific. Since Origins or *samudaya* includes both karma and kleśa, were *sopadhiśeṣa* an elimination of *samudaya* in its entirety, this would mean that it was also an elimination of karma. It is possible, however, that Ar in fact thought that *sopadhiśeṣa* was attained through the elimination of *kleśa* alone. Since karma in the absence of *kleśa* is inert, causally incapable of producing suffering, there is a logic to saying that, upon having gotten rid of *kleśa*, one has eliminated the cause of suffering.

Be that as it may, Ar's infelicitous turn of phrase was enough to spark a controversy among commentators who were intent on clarifying that attaining nirvāṇa is just a matter of eliminating *kleśa*, *not* karma. When later writers such as Je Tsongkhapa and Gorampa discussed the *sopadhi-nirupadhi* distinction, they singled out Ar's position, albeit not by name.[36] Je Tsongkhapa, for instance, put it this way:

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[34] Ar Byang chub Yeshe was a student of Ngok Lotsowa's disciple Shes rab 'bar (Sparham, "A Note on Gnyal Zhig 'Jam Pa'i Rao Rje, the Author of a Handwritten Sher Phyin Commentary from about 1200," 19).

[35] *Ar*, 308: *mngon pa ltar na rgyu kun 'byung gi bden pa spangs la 'bras bu sdug bsngal gyi bden pa dang ma bral ba'i lhag bcas.*

It is worth noting that even though Yaśomitrā says almost the same thing, it was Ar's way of putting it that was singled out for censure (SA, 219).

[36] *gser phreng*, 53; *yum don rab gsal*, 27. Although Je Tsongkhapa may have been one of the first to take issue with Ar's formulation of the *sopadhi-nirupadhi* distinction, his near contemporary, Rongton, whose AA commentary was the immediate inspiration for Gorampa's *yum don rab gsal*, perhaps heedful of this line of critique, was careful to stipulate that *sopadhi* results from the attainment of *kleśa-origins* (*nyon mongs pa'i kun 'byung*) (*tshig don rab gsal*, 22).

> Some previous scholar held that the difference [between *sopadhi* and *nirupadhi*] is between a) having entirely eliminated True Origins while not having eliminated the Truth of Suffering and b) also having entirely eliminated the Truth of Suffering. The reason this is wrong is that even though Arhats have exhausted the karma and kleśa which definitely impel a future existence (*yang srid 'phen nges*)… numerous textual sources, higher and lower, state that they have contaminated (*zad bcas*) karma.[37]

In other words, *sopadhiśeṣa* cannot be an elimination of karma because those who have attained *sopadhiśeṣa*, Arhats, still have certain kinds of karma. As evidence for his claim, Je Tsongkhapa cites none other than Yaśomitrā's statement that Arhat' still have karma and the previous passage from the *Pramāṇavārttika*. Significantly, when Shākya Chokden criticizes Tsongkhapa's treatment of Ar's position, his objections are purely terminological, highlighting the underlying consensus among Tibetan thinkers that *sopadhiśeṣa-nirvāṇa* was a matter of eliminating kleśa.[38]

In short, to sum up what has been said so far, Indian and Tibetan Buddhist philosophers insisted that *sopadhiśeṣa-nirvāṇa* should be understood simply as an internal transformation of certain mental states. Even though karma is part of why we why suffer, the Arhat is freed through getting rid of kleśa, the necessary condition for that karma to ripen. Indian Buddhist thinkers clearly saw *sopadhiśeṣa* as a psychological achievement, although, as we have just seen, their rationale was altogether different from the motivation behind contemporary psychological accounts of nirvāṇa. Nor is our tendency to emphasize these psychological features anything new—we have just seen how Tibetan commentators too were quick to stress that *sopadhiśeṣa* must be understood in purely

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[37] *gser phreng*, 53: *kha cig kun 'byung ma lus par spangs kyang sdug bsngal ma spangs pa dang / sdug bsngal yang ma lus par spangs pa khyad par yin zhes 'chad pa ni mi 'thad de /… zhes pa la sogs pa gzhung gong 'og rnams su zag bcas kyi las yod par du ma zhig bshad pa'i phyir ro.*

For discussion of Je Tsongkhapa's discussion of nirvāṇa in his "Golden Rosary" (*gser phreng*) see Obermiller, *Nirvāṇa in Tibetan Buddhism*, 5.

[38] Shākya Chokden argues that since "*x* is eliminated (*spangs pa*)" means the cause of *x* arising again has been removed, in *sopadhiśeṣa-nirvāṇa*, karma has been eliminated since the cause of future karma is *kleśa* (*rol mtsho*, *ka* 66). As such, the difference between Tsongkhapa and Shākya Chokden is a matter of whether to use the term "eliminated (*spangs pa*)" in cases where the cause has been removed.

psychological terms, again for reasons other than our contemporary delight in all things psychological.

I began this section by asking whether the immanence we find in Buddhist texts is substantially different from the immanence Secular Buddhism offers. I suggested that it is, but I have yet to explain how. In their contemporary interpretations, Buddhist concepts of immanence have undergone a profound transformation, but the full scope of this change is not obvious from scrutinizing their explicit content. As we have just seen, Buddhist texts themselves offer a deeply psychology account of *sopadhiśeṣa*, perhaps not that different from what Batchelor or Wright have in mind. What sets contemporary views apart is that immanence is itself the raison d'être of the path. For Secular Buddhism, achieving immanent nirvāṇa—or the immanent 'being in the world' it unleashes—is the reason why we practice, the end of the path, the purpose of the Buddha's teachings.

1.3. The Limits of Immanence

For all its immediacy and psychological appeal, for Buddhist philosophers, Abhidharmakas, Pramāṇavādins, Mādhyamikas, and their Tibetan commentators, immanent nirvāṇa was not the final objective of the path. Although some traditional commentaries tell us that attaining *sopadhiśeṣa-nirvāṇa* is *mokṣa* or liberation, others suggest that this alone does not even constitute genuine freedom.[39] Genuine liberation or not, by all accounts *sopadhiśeṣa* wasn't enough—the Arhat still hasn't reached her final objective. Since at this point Arhats have eliminated delusions

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[39] Although many Tibetan scholars did think that when an Arhat achieves *sopadhiśeṣa* this is *mokṣa* (*thar pa*), Shakhya Chokden speculates that, from a Nikaya (lit. *nyan thos sde pa*) perspective, it is difficult to see how this alone could count as nirvāṇa, since one is still not free of the "Māra of Aggregates," (*phung po'i bdud = skandha-māra*) a point we shall discuss below (*rol mtsho*, *ka,* 68).

and dispositions, the so-called "root of saṃsāra," this needs some explaining.[40] Think of that Arhat you know, leaning and loafing at ease, spiritual work complete, as happy as could be.[41] What is left that keeps such a person bound? Why is freedom from kleśa not freedom enough?

In brief, the psychological transformation of *sopadhiśeṣa* doesn't solve the problem because conditioning is the problem, not our attitudes or affective mental states. Since this point is of overwhelming importance for seeing the limitations of psychologized soteriological concepts, we need to reflect on this point as carefully as we can. To that end, let us return to when the Buddha first broke his silence after his Awakening, when he says that what he has attained is "deathless" (*amṛta*) and unconditioned (*asaṃskṛta*).[42] We've already discussed the unconditioned in Chapter Two, so let us start with first of these (and, with, a little patience, reflecting on the deathless will shed new light on the unconditioned as well). This term "deathless" or *amṛta* is the negation of *mṛta*, dead, from the root *mṛ*, to die (not so distant ancestors of our "immortal" and "mortal").[43] The freedom the Buddha attained was also a freedom from death. Here is where immanence shows its limitations—a purely immanent nirvāṇa, whether that is a more jejune emotional transformation or the complete elimination of kleśa, does not yet address the problem of mortality.[44] Mortality is a problem for which nirvāṇa is the solution.

In what sense mortality is a problem, however, is neither obvious nor is it a universally shared intuition, as we are about to see. Buddhist texts talk about the *problem* of mortality as "Māra" or

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[40] AK 5.1.

[41] Whitman, "Song of Myself," 33.

[42] LV, Ch.25.1.

[43] Olivelle, "Amṛtā: Women and Indian Technologies of Immortality," 428; Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities: Utopias of the Pali Imaginaire*, 146.

[44] Schmidt-Leukel, "Nirvāṇa as 'Unconditioned' (*Asaṃskṛta*) and 'Transcendent' (*Lokottara*) Reality," 87.

the "Demon of death," the Buddhist grand reaper if you will. When we tug again at the etymological thread juxtaposing deathless (*amṛta*) nirvāṇa with death (*mṛta*) we begin to see why Māra, whose name, from the same root, literally means "killer," rages through the commentarial literature, quickly becoming the antithesis of deathless nirvāṇa. Thus it is that the *Ratnagotravibhaṇga* says of the Buddha:

> Since the Māra of death (*mṛtyumāra*) roams (*pracāra*) not, he has attained the peaceful deathless (*amṛta*) state (*pada*).[45]

While in the earliest narratives of the Buddha's Awakening, Māra, or Death, is personified as a demonic enemy of awakening, the Māras, plural, come to be a way to conceptualize what the Buddha destroyed in his immanent awakening under the bodhi tree, and what remained to be overcome.[46] As this is precisely what we are trying to sort out in this section, we are going to be following Māra's footsteps. Anfractuous though his trail may be, reflecting closely on how Buddhist philosophers thought about Māra will give a distinctly Buddhist version of the problem of mortality and embodiment which, in turn, will point to why immanence is not enough.

Asanga offers an overwhelmingly influential account of the four Māras that came to be paradigmatic for later Tibetan commentators:[47]

> Here there are four Māras. The yogin immersed (*prayukta*) in practice (*yoga*) should know their many demonic deeds (*mārakarma*), for it is having understood them that they are to be abandoned (*parivarjitavya*). Herein, the four Māras are as follows: the Māra of the Aggregates (*skandhamāra*), the Māra of Kleśa (*kleśamāra*), the Māra of Death (*maraṇamāra*), and Devaputra Māra

[45] RGV 2.66b: *samāmṛtapadaprāpti mṛtyumārāpracārataḥ*. Although Takasaki's rendering of the Sanskrit reads *mṛtyumārāvabhaṇgāt* "due to destroying the Māra of Death," the Tibetan (*rgyu ba med pa'i phyir*) supports *apracārataḥ* (RGV(D), f.65a) (*A Study on the* Ratnagotravibhāga *(Uttaratantra), Being a Treatise on the* Tathāgatagarbha *Theory of Mahāyāna Buddhism*, 333).

[46] Although enumerating four Māras appears to be characteristic of later Sanskrit Buddhism, in the Pali canon "*māra*" is also used to refer to more than just this demonic personification (Boyd, "Symbols of Evil in Buddhism," 63). See, for instance, SN iii, 195.

[47] See, for example, *gser phreng*, 903. For discussion, see Lopez, *The Heart Sūtra Explained:Indian and Tibetan Commentaries*, 25.

> (*devaputramāra*).[48] The Māra of Aggregates is the five appropriated (*upādāna*) aggregates, the Māra of Kleśa is kleśas active (*avacara*) in the three realms, the Māra of Death is the termination (*kālakriyā*) of various beings from amongst the various classes of beings. The one who is arisen in the desire realm who has become powerful, who creates obstacles to distract [the yogin] immersed in virtue in order to go beyond (*samatikrama*) the aggregates, kleśa, and death, he is called "Devaputra Māra."
> The four Māras are presented in terms of within what one dies, why one dies, what is death, and that state of affairs (*vastu*) which interferes with crossing beyond death. One dies within the five appropriation-aggregates that have been born and are currently existing. As the result of kleśa one is caused to be born in the future, and what has been born dies. By its very nature, the Māra of death is the perishing (*cyuti*) or mortality (*cyavanatā*) of beings, i.e., the cessation (*nirodha*) of the life-force (*jīvitendriya*) that is termination (*kālakriyā*).[49]

As this passage makes clear, above all, Māra is death, and only by extension is the term used for what dies and why.[50] The appropriated aggregates are what dies, or in Asanga's locative locution, "where one dies," so they are also Māra. Kleśa caused us to be born, and since what is born dies, they too are Māra. In contrast to Devaputra's dramatic role in narrative accounts of the Buddha's Awakening, in which "Māra" refers to him alone, with Asanga he is relegated to a secondary role as gadfly and tormentor.[51]

In the commentarial narratives of the Buddha's Awakening, we are told that, under the bodhi tree, the Buddha defeated Devaputra Māra during the first watch (*yama*) of the night and destroyed

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[48] Often interpreted as a subset of desire realm gods by both Tibetan (e.g. Shākya Chokden*, rol mtsho*, kha, 276) and modern commentators (Vassilkov, "The Indian Hero in Heaven and on Earth: On the Meaning of the Word *Devaputra*"; Lopez, *The Heart Sūtra Explained:Indian and Tibetan Commentaries*, 26).

[49] ŚrBh, 262: *tatra catvāro mārāḥ saṃbahulāni mārakarmāṇi veditavyāni yoginā yogaprayuktena / te ca parijñāya parivarjayitavyāḥ /tatra catvāro mārāḥ / tadyathā skandhamāraḥ, kleśamāraḥ, maraṇamāraḥ, devaputramāraś ca / pañcopādānaskandhāḥ skandhamāraḥ / traidhātukāvacarāḥ kleśāḥ kleśamāraḥ / teṣāṃ teṣāṃ sattvānāṃ tasmāt tasmāt sattvanikāyād yan maraṇaṃ kālakriyā maraṇamāraḥ / yo 'sya kuśalapakṣaprayuktasya skandhakleśamṛtyusamatikramāya kāmadhātūpapanno devaputra aiśvaryaprāptaḥ, antarāyam upasaṃharati vyākṣepakaraṇe, ayam ucyate devaputramāraḥ / tatra yatra ca mriyate, yena ca mriyate, yaś cāsau mṛtyuḥ, yena ca mṛtyuṃ na samatikrāmaty antarāyikena vastunā / ity etad adhikṛtya catvāro mārā vyavasthāpitāḥ / tatra pañcasūpādānaskandheṣu jāteṣu vartamāneṣu mriyate / kleśāj janayaty āyatyām, jātaś ca mriyate / cyutiś ca cyavanatā sattvānāṃ jīvitendriyanirodhaḥ kālakriyā svabhāvata eva mṛtyuḥ.*

[50] Wayman, "Studies in Yama and Māra," 113.

[51] Boyd, "Symbols of Evil in Buddhism," 63.

the Māra of kleśa at dawn, conspicuously leaving the Māras of death and the aggregates still on the loose.[52] Here we see what the Buddha's *sopadhiśeṣa* accomplished and what remained to be done. If we want to know why the Buddha was still not perfectly free, even after his Awakening under the Bodhi tree, we need to track down the Māra of death and the Māra of the aggregates.

Let us start with Death, in keeping with Asanga's idea that the Māras are rooted in mortality. The way we are going to get a grip on this Māra is by asking what is wrong with death, even though answering this question will take us into some fairly abstruse territory. There is something intuitive about the idea that there is nothing wrong with death. After all, isn't mortality just part of life or even, as Wallace Stevens puts it, that "death is the mother of beauty."[53] The fact that we, along with everything and everyone around us, change and die may well be constitutive of their beauty. Likewise, a decent case can be made for the view that care only makes sense if there is death—if our loves one's could not die, it isn't clear that any of our familiar forms of care would even be possible.[54] Moreover, Buddhist texts often invest death with religious significance, whether that is through reflecting on the teacher's death as his final teaching on impermanence or Tantric transmutations of death into Awakening.[55]

Furthermore, while it is true that, as the theologian Paul Tillich points out, there is a universal dread of death implicit in the fact that, no matter where you go, capital punishment and invading armies are perceived as a threat, that only shows that people are scared of death, not that it is a

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[52] AKbh 44. It is not unlikely that Vasubandhu's remarks about the Māras refer to something akin to what we find in Asanga's presentation but for possible historical relations between these two texts see Park, "What Are the *Ācāryas* or **Yaugācārabhūmikas* Doing in *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* 3-28ab?," 99.

[53] Stevens, "Sunday Morning," 73.

[54] Hägglund, *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom*.

[55] See, for example, *kun bzang bla ma' zhal lung*, 41 & 388.

problem.[56] The fact that my daughter dreads getting a shot does not mean that shots are problem. Dread of death is a psychological fact; whether death is a problem is a normative philosophical or religious question.[57]

The question of why mortality is a problem is even more vexing in a Buddhist context: if we believe that grasping to permanence, or wanting to live forever, is a cognitive error, why should we object to dying? In other words, the most obvious reason why death is a problem is that we think sticking around is a good thing. So, if we think that our desire to perdure is in error, it cannot be our reason for objecting to death.

If death is not itself problematic, perhaps it is fear of death that is the problem?[58] We will get to why this way of thinking about the problem of mortality falls short of what we actually find in the Buddhist texts we've been focusing on but, for now, simply notice how, as soon as we say this, the question of mortality shifts from being about death to our attitudes about death. The question itself has become psychologized. Whereas the original problem was our mortality, now the problem has become internalized as a matter of how we think or feel about that mortality.

According to such a psychological approach, Buddhist philosophy provides a straightforward solution. My fear of dying is predicated on the unrealistic sense of myself as something real over and beyond the labels "I" and "me" that I and others affix to my psychophysical elements.[59] As soon as we stop misperceiving ourselves as real, we will stop caring so much that we are going to die. And, since the issue was not dying but, rather, our fear of death, the problem is solved. Once

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[56] Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, 43.

[57] As empirical research in Terror Management Theory has shown, fear of death appears to be a universal and fundamental feature of human psychology (Solomon, *The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life*). For the existential ramifications of this fact, see Becker, *The Denial of Death*; Loy, *Lack and Transcendence*.

[58] Becker, *The Denial of Death*; Solomon, *The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life*.

[59] Siderits, "On the Soteriological Significance of Emptiness," 16.

we are old enough to know *Old Yeller* is 'just a movie,' we are a lot less upset at the prospect of him dying at the end. Once I have experientially internalized the knowledge that there is no 'me,' I will not react fearfully at the prospect of my own demise.

This optimistic upshot is also the reason why this interpretation fails exegetically. For all its existential merits, if we see the Māra of death in these psychological terms, it is incomprehensible why, under the bodhi tree, the Buddha didn't conquer the Māra of Death. When the Buddha was Awakened, or when an Arhat attains *sopadhiśeṣa-nirvāṇa*, no trace of mistaken grasping onto personal identity remains, all cognitive error and emotional confusion have been eliminated. Since even without any fear, the Arhat is still under the power of the Māra of Death, it would seem the problem of mortality must lie elsewhere.

What we are about to see is that, at least in the context of the Māras, the problem is not dying *per se* but, rather, being under the control of death. The Māra of death refers to the fact that we have no control over our death. This crucial point comes out rather abstrusely in Abhidharma commentarial discussions of an episode from the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*, set near the end of the Buddha's life while he was staying at Vaiśāli, that is thought to mark the moment when he conquered the Māra of death. There he told Ananda that one who has practiced as he has "could live for even an eon (*kalpa*) or even more than an eon (*kalpāvaśeṣa*),"[60] but, not getting the hint, Ananda famously fails to request the Buddha to remain on.[61] Ananda's failure prompts the Buddha to resolve that he will pass into *parinirvāṇa* in three months' time.[62] Now here comes the important

[60] Quoted in AKbh 44: *kalpam api tiṣṭheyaṃ kalpāvaśeṣam apī*. Found in both the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* (MP(W), 15.10) and DN ii, 104. Note that there is considerable controversy over whether "*kalpa*" refers to an eon or a century, and over whether *kalpāvaśeṣa* refers to more than a *kalpa* or a part of a *kalpa* (Jaini, "Buddha's Prolongation of Life," 548; Walshe, *The Long Discourses of the Buddha*, 246 fn. 400).

[61] DN ii, 103. Vetter, *The Ideas and Meditative Practices of Early Buddhism*, xv; Collins, *Selfless Persons: Imagery and Thought in Theravāda Buddhism*, 228.

[62] MP(W) 16.11.

part, as bafflingly arcane as it may sound: at this point, the Buddha, with a calm mind (*samāhite citte*), took possession (*adhiṣṭhā*) of his life force (*jīvitasaṃskāra*) and relinquished (*utsṛj*) his vital force (*āyuḥsaṃskāra*).[63]

So how does this lead to the idea that lack of control is what makes death a problem? In the *Kośa*, Vasubandhu initially explains that the Buddha relinquished his vital force in order to demonstrate his subjugation (*vaśitva*) of death, and took possession of his life force in order to demonstrate his power over life (*jīvita*).[64] As such, according to this explanation, conquering death is choosing to die at will. Sounds good—the image of the Sage crossing his legs, ready to die, is compelling, but then are we to say that everyone who ever shot himself in the head has conquered death?

Vasubandhu immediately goes on, however, to offer a Vaibhāṣika interpretation in which relinquishing the vital force (i.e., dying) conquerors the Māra of Aggregates, whereas taking possession of the life-force (i.e., living longer) is what conquerors Death. Yaśomitrā explains:

> [When Vasubandhu says] "in order to conquer aggregates and death" he is referring to the four Māras: Devaputra Māra (*devaputramāra*), the Māra of kleśa (*kleśamāra*), the Māra of the Aggregates (*skandhamāra*), and the Māra of death (*maraṇamāra*). During the first watch, Devaputra Māra was conquered. He surveyed [the world] with his divine eye (*divyena cakṣuṣā*) during the second watch, and the Māra of kleśa was conquered in the third watch. But [the Buddha] having mastered (*adhiṣṭhā*) his life force (*jīvitasaṃskāra*) in Vaiśāli for three months, he then relinquished (*utsṛj*) his vital force (*āyuḥsaṃskāra*). The aggregates are relinquished in order to conquer the Māra of the Aggregates.

[63] MP(W) 16.13. What the life-force (*jīvitasaṃskāra*) is, and how it is different from the vital force (*āyuḥsaṃskāra*), is itself the subject of considerable Abhidharma controversy (AKBh 44, Jaini, "Buddha's Prolongation of Life"). Since the available answers do little to illuminate the question at hand, I would urge the reader to simply forge ahead. For discussions of life-force in a Theravada context, see Collins, *Selfless Persons: Imagery and Thought in Theravāda Buddhism*, 228.

[64] AKbh 44. Shākya Chokden, for one, interprets this initial response as Vasubandhu's own position (*dka' gnas*, 136).

> When they are relinquished, one should be dead, so the mastering [of the life force] was in order to defeat the Māra of death.[65]

In contrast to Vasubandhu's initial position in which letting go of life conquers death, here "taking possession" of his life force, attaining the ability to continue to live on as desired, is what conquers death. Unlike the first interpretation, this isn't something you can accomplish with a gun and a sufficient dose of desperation.

According to either interpretation, however, overcoming death is about developing the power to choose the time of one's death—whether that means the power to die or the power to live. If choosing one's time is what conquers the Demon of Death, this Māra must be our inability to control when we die. So it is that Shākya Chokden and other Tibetan commentators concluded that "the Māra of death refers to the inability to live beyond the limit (*tshad*) of one's life allotted by previous karma" and that destroying the Māra of death means gaining the power to extend one's life beyond its natural limit.[66] In short, according to this Abhidharma line of thinking, conquering Death doesn't mean not dying.[67] Or, put differently, the problem of Death is lack of control, not mortality per se.

As with death, so too with the Māra of the Aggregates, the problem is control. As we just saw alluded to in the *Kośa*, the Buddha defeats the Māra of the Aggregates only when he passes into

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[65] SA, 106: *catvāro mārāḥ devaputramāraḥ kleśamāraḥ skandhamāraḥ maraṇamāraś ca tatra prathame yāme devaputramāro nirjitaḥ / dvitīye yāme divyena cakṣuṣā vyavalokya tṛtīye yāme kleśamāro nirjitaḥ / vaiśālyāṃ tu traimāsyaṃ jīvitasaṃskārān adhiṣṭhāya āyuḥsaṃskārān utsṛṣṭavān / skandhamāranirjayārtham utsṛṣṭāḥ skandhāḥ / teṣūtsṛṣṭeṣu martavyaṃ syāt / ato maraṇamāranirjayārtham adhiṣṭhitā iti.*

Note that Yaśomitrā attributes this position to the Vaibhāṣika (*ibid*).

[66] *dka 'gnas*, 143: *sngon gyi las kyis 'phangs pa'i tshe'i tshad las lhag par gnas pa'i nus pa med pa la 'chi bdag gi bdud dang / de las lhag par gnas pa'i mthu grub pa la de bcom par 'jog pa'i phyir ro.*

[67] *gsung 'bum, wa* 137. Tibetan commentators often also identify another "Mahāyāna" way of thinking about the Māras more in keeping with the *Ratnagotravibhaṇga* passage above in which conquering the Māra of Death happens when the Buddha transcends the bodhisattva's need to be born in saṃsāra out of compassion never to born or die again (for at this point the Buddha can simply manifest infinite bodies who only pretend to be born and die) (see, for example, *phar phyin spyi don* 463).

parinirvāṇa or, in other words, attains *nirupadhiśeṣa-nirvāṇa*. The aggregates are the last remnants (*śeṣa*) of the Arhat's self-grasping, continuing on even after this has been eliminated. Only death finally releases the Arhat from this ill-begotten inheritance. Indeed, the aggregates are such an impediment to freedom that, as we have already seen, they are the "remainder" (*śeṣa*) that holds the Arhat back from the unqualified freedom of *nirupadhiśeṣa-nirvāṇa*.

When we ask what the problem is with embodiment, our tendency to view these problems in psychological terms remerges. Often without realizing it, both popular and academic explanations of the Truth of Suffering proceed as if the suffering in question is a psychological state of frustration, dis-ease, or discontent.[68] The *sopadhi-nirupadhi* distinction starkly exposes how suffering remains even for someone with best imaginable sort of attitude, without any of our psychological shortcomings, without any frustrations or discontents.[69]

Why think that the aggregates continue to be a Māra, a tormentor, long after *kleśa* have ceased? Or, put differently, how tormented can someone who has achieved imperturbable inner peace really be? Quite, apparently. In the Sūtras, we find that Arhats do still experience the agonies of physical suffering, old age, and dying. There is, for instance, a parable of an Arhat who, due to previous karma, is unable to procure food or drink. While at first this manifests as bad luck, missing the midday meal for one reason or another, eventually even when he puts water to his lips it turns to ash. In the end, this Arhat accepts his fate, drinks the ashes, and dies.[70] If this isn't obviously

[68] Depending on the author, we find dukkha glossed as "frustration, alienation, and despair," (Siderits, "On the Soteriological Significance of Emptiness," 15); the "dis-ease that keeps us from enjoying our lives" (Loy, *A New Buddhist Path: Enlightenment, Evolution, and Ethics in the Modern World*, 9); that "all experiences necessarily involve suffering" (Ziporyn, *Emptiness and Omnipresence: An Essential Introduction to Tiantai Buddhism*, 3).

[69] Tibetan commentators make this point when they claim that even though someone who has attained *sopadhiśeṣa* has eliminated (*spangs pa*) suffering by virtue of having eliminated its cause (i.e. *kleśa*), they still have or, literally, "remain" (*gnas pa*) in, suffering since they still have appropriated aggregates (*phar phyin mtha' dpyod*, 48).

[70] This is the story of the Arhat *sgur chung*, recounted in the *Karmaśataka* (F.112b).

suffering, there are also many canonical cases in which Arhats, afflicted by intense physical pain, committed suicide.[71] Life as an Arhat was not always a bed of roses.

But then we don't need a Sūtra to tell us that the problem is more than just our attitude, if we give them time, our bodies will do that for us. Atul Gawande tells this story, with all the most important details:

> Even as our bones and teeth soften, the rest of our body hardens. Blood vessels, joints, the muscle and valves of the heart, and even the lungs pick up substantial deposits of calcium and turn stiff. Under a microscope, the vessels and soft tissues display the same form of calcium that you find in bone…[72]
> Our functional lung capacity decreases. Our bowels slow down. Our glands stop functioning. Even our brains shrink: at the age of thirty, the brain is a three-pound organ that barely fits inside the skull; by our seventies, gray-matter loss leaves almost an inch of spare room…
> By age eighty-five, working memory and judgment are sufficiently impaired that 40 percent of us have textbook dementia.[73]

This is what it means to be under the control of Māra. Or, as Asanga puts it, to be bound by the Māras' "noose" (*pāśa*), to be in their hands (*hastagata*),[74] having to do just as they may wish (*yathākāmakaraṇīya*)."[75] The sorts of bodies that we have, and the physical experiences that come along with them, are outside of our control.[76] We do not choose to get sick, to have diabetes or cancer. Things happen to us. Nowhere is this felt more poignantly than in the body's final revolt, as our organs fail and our mind dims.

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[71] MN iii, 266. Note, however, that how these canonical suicides are to be interpreted is much debated (Wiltshire, "The 'Suicide' Problem in the Pali Canon"; Keown, "Buddhism and Suicide The Case of Channa").

[72] Gawande, *Being Mortal: Illness, Medicine and What Matters in the End*, 41.

[73] Gawande, 43.

[74] Apple, "The Phrase Dharmaparyayo Hastagato in Mahayana Buddhist Literature," 26.

[75] ŚrBh, 264.

[76] Gowans, *Philosophy of the Buddha*, 36.

The Māras shows us what it really means, practically speaking, to be conditioned by previous causes and conditions, as we first discussed in the Chapter Two. Things we don't like, painful things, tragic things, happen to us because of previous causes. No matter how much agency or free will we think we have, what we experience now is far downstream from what caused it. If there was a moment when we could have chosen this experience, it is long past. The fact that everything in our experience is conditioned by causes outside of our control is the so-called suffering of conditioning (*saṃskāraduḥkha*) that characterizes existence.[77] What it means to be in saṃsāra is that there is a vulnerability to pain at the very core of our being alive. When the Buddha instructed, "know suffering," he meant recognize this vulnerability to pain, sorrow, and tragedy. Transcending mortality, *mṛta*, and Māra is at the heart of the Buddha's awakening because death, just plain old death, or the Māras in all their writhing complexity, are the visible and visceral manifestation of our conditioning.

What we need to take away from this demonic detour is this—being subject to causes and conditions outside of our control is the problem with saṃsāra, the problem with being a creature of the aggregates. Death is a problem because it subjects us to its control, not because there is something bad waiting on the other side or because we should have lived a little longer. Embodiment is a problem because it renders us subject to all of the physical and biological forces outside of our control. The important point here is that old age, sickness, and death are not just psychological problems because they cannot be fully addressed by a change in attitude. Consider the difference, for instance, between having low self-esteem and being a victim of domestic abuse. Low self-esteem is a psychological problem insofar as, when you stop thinking of yourself that way, the problem is solved. Not so with domestic abuse. While therapy can help you get out of an

[77] AKbh 329.

abusive relationship, it can't solve the problem—only separation from the perpetrator can do that. Likewise, infirmity and death are not psychological problems in this sense that changing our attitudes—acceptance, serenity, and whatever else—don't touch the underlying fact of being conditioned. The reason freedom from kleśa is not freedom enough is that conditioning was always the problem, not our attitudes and discontents.

2. What does Transcendence Mean?

What does it mean to transcend saṃsāra though? Even though Vasubandhu, Candrakīrti and just about every other Indian Buddhist philosopher agreed that the causally conditioned aggregates are themselves the suffering the path was intended to transcend, what constituted this transcendence was, perhaps, their point of deepest disagreement. Thus far we have been talking about "transcendence" as the intuition that freedom from suffering is gained through leaving behind this body and this life, loosely captured by the concept of *nirupadhiśeṣa*. Now, however, as we drill down to look more closely at what constitutes this 'freedom from,' various emic concepts suggest themselves: widely used terms like *nirodha* or "cessation," *prahāṇa* or "elimination," and also, as we shall see shortly, peculiarly Abhidharma terms like *visaṃyoga* or "separation." Nevertheless, the disagreement I am pointing to was not strictly terminological—*nirodha* and *prahāṇa*, for instance, were used almost universally.[78] At the heart of this disagreement, rather, was whether, when you transcend the aggregates, you are getting rid of them, like an amputated limb; or whether you are simply seeing through them, seeing that were never really there, in which case transcendence is more akin to recognizing something you should have known all along. The

[78] AK 1.5; AKbh, 92; MMK 25.2; PsP, 524. While in many passages of the PsP, the extent to which Candrakīrti is simply using his opponents' terminology is an open question, in a YṢV passage we will discuss later in this chapter, he takes great pains to show that it is the Mādhyamika who offers the best explanation of *prahāṇa* (YṢV, 42).

difference is perhaps analogous to getting rid of your brother in some more or less grizzly way as opposed to finding out that he was adopted and, therefore, that, strictly speaking, he never was your brother in the first place. To get a purchase on what constitutes this transcendence of saṃsāra we will start with the Abhidharma notion of "separation" before turning to look at how Candrakīrti puts an altogether different spin on things.

2.1. Separation

In the Abhidharma, transcending conditioning means the separation (*visaṃyoga*) from what is conditioned—namely, the five aggregates. For present purposes, we do not need to rehash the questions from the previous chapters about the metaphysics of this unconditioned nirvāṇa, nor do we need to revisit the question of what, if anything, remains. The effect ceases when its cause is stopped. The burner flame ceases when I turn off the gas; the aggregates cease (*nirodha*) when we eliminate (*prahāṇa*) delusions.[79] Transcendence of conditioning is when we stop creating the conditions that perpetuate the causal chain of suffering.

What matters for our purposes is that, since transcendence is the ending of a causal process, to transcend the suffering aggregates is to eliminate them, just as we might get rid of strep throat after a course of antibiotics. We had strep throat, it was there, and then, through eliminating its microbial causes, it was eliminated. Even though, for the Sarvāstivādin, the point is that we are separate from kleśa and skandha, not that they are eliminated, for our purposes, this comes down to the same thing. Maybe, instead of the analogy of eliminating sore throat, setting down a heavy load or taking

[79] Siderits, "On the Soteriological Significance of Emptiness," 15.

off a nasty diaper are more appropriate analogies.[80] However, whether eliminated or cast aside, the point is that 'freedom from x' means that we had it and now we don't.

When we turn to Mahāyāna rethinking of nirvāṇa, two aspects of this causal approach will become critically important: a) even after eliminating the cause, the effect remains for its natural duration; b) freedom from saṃsāra is a matter of no longer having some previously existent aggregates.

Let us start with the first. Since this causal approach simply stops the cause from producing any new effect (i.e. another round of rebirth), you are still left with the present aggregates (the effect of previous causes) for the duration of your lifespan. This constitutes the *sopadhiśeṣa nirvāṇa* we have been talking about thus far, where the only thing gained is an internal psychological change. In the case of strep throat, even after eliminating the cause, we still cough until the mucus clears from our chest, in the case of reducing the number of smokers, we are still left with an ageing generation riddled with lung disease, in the case of freedom from suffering, we are left with the aggregates until their transcendence at death. Although, for the Abhidharma scholar, this is an acceptable consequence of the Buddhist path and the basis for their *sopadhi-nirupadhi* distinction, a bit further along we will see how Candrakīrti uses this point to argue that the Abhidharma's nirvāṇa falls short of its own criterion for freedom.

Of more overarching importance for Candrakīrti and other Mahāyāna philosophers, however, is the second point, that 'freedom from *x*' means getting rid of *x* causally in much the way that I can get weeds out of the garden, trash out of the kitchen, or dispose of an extra sibling. Although, at this point, this may seem like the only sense of freedom available, in the next section I will show how this is not the case.

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[80] Cox, "Attainment through Abandonment: The Sarvāstivādin Path of Removing Defilements," 87.

For the moment, however, to make the implications of this causal approach a bit clearer, image this scenario: there is another pandemic but, this time, worse, highly transmissible with certain death upon exposure. To be healthy, free of this plague, means not having the pathogens which, in turn, means never going out, never seeing anyone. If this is what it means to be free of contagion, it will come at great emotional and social cost. So construed, each of us faces a stark choice: either live in isolation or die of exposure to the plague. From a Mahāyāna perspective, thinking that freedom from saṃsāra means getting rid of it in some causal sense is a problem precisely because it forces us into a similarly unacceptable either/or. Since true freedom from saṃsāra means, simply put, not having a body or mind, it is only by giving up or postponing freedom that we reap the fruits of embodied activity—whether that is loafing in the sun or working for the sake of all beings.

2.2. Knowing

What we need is an altogether different way of understanding what it means to be free from saṃsāra or, in the terms we've been using, transcendence. In this new Mahāyāna context in which nirvāṇa is the culmination of the bodhisattva's active engagement in the world, transcendence can no longer simply be a matter of leaving behind our conditioning.[81] While the ascendance of the three-bodied Buddha is more obvious and has received more attention, fundamentally Mahāyāna soteriology involves a transformation of what it means to be free from saṃsāra.[82]

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[81] Hirakawa, *A History of Indian Buddhism: From Śākyamuni to Early Mahāyāna*, 259. For discussion of how early Mahāyāna notions of being a bodhisattva may have had a different rationale, see Nattier, *A Few Good Men: The Bodhisattva Path According to* The Inquiry of Ugra (Ugraparipṛcchā); Drewes, "The Problem of Becoming a Bodhisattva and the Emergence of Mahāyāna," 158 ff.

[82] Makransky, *Buddhahood Embodied: Sources of Controversy in India and Tibet*. The Mahāyāna transformation of nirvāṇa extends both to their own final goal of non-abiding nirvāṇa and to how they conceived of the "standard" nirvāṇa attained by *śrāvakas*. So it is that, when the *Prajñapāramitā Sūtras* and their subsequent commentarial literature describe a lesser path for so-called *Śrāvakas*, those who simply seek personal liberation, more often than not this "*śrāvaka* nirvāṇa" is recast in a distinctly Mahayana hue.

Instead, freedom from saṃsāra is constituted by a shift in seeing, not by causally eliminating some previously existing thing. For Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti, attaining nirvāṇa is knowing saṃsāra, not leaving it behind in the way we might leave a bag at a bus stop.[83] To return to the example of a plague in which we must either choose isolation or contagion, imagine that unlike the last pandemic, this one does turn out to be a hoax, just another case of misinformation gone viral—there are no pathogens, there is no deadly disease. But, as we are becoming collectively more aware these days, misinformation does not clear up on its own. People still think there is a plague, and they still think it is dangerous to go outside. Now, in this new altered scenario, our task has become epistemic—we need to see that there is no pathogen or virus that is getting us sick. Practically speaking, even though there is a very real problem that needs to be addressed insofar as everyone thinks there is a plague, addressing that problem does not require a choice between isolation and contagion. In essence, this is what the Madhyamaka epistemic revaluation of nirvāṇa accomplishes—to be free from the suffering aggregates is a matter of seeing through them, as it were, not getting rid of them.

Just how seeing its true nature constitutes freedom saṃsāra is not obvious. Although understanding how and, in what sense, this is the case will take careful consideration, by way of an initial approximation, consider Nāgārjuna's statement in his *Yuktiṣāṣtikā*:

> Knowing (*parijñāna*) saṃsāric existence (*bhava*) itself is called 'nirvāṇa.'[84]

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[83] Unlike the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra* commentarial literature which painstaking distinguishes what practices and goals apply to *śrāvakas*, *pratyekabuddhas*, and *bodhisattvas*, Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti often do not distinguish whether they are talking about the non-abiding nirvāṇa at the end of the bodhisattva's path or the nirvāṇa sought by their Nikaya opponents. Nevertheless, as we saw in the last chapter and as should become clearer in what follows, since the arguments they make in favor of their nirvāṇa would apply to any notion of nirvāṇa, we should take their claims to apply to nirvāṇa across the board.

[84] YṢ 6: *nirvāṇaṃ ca bhavaś caiva dvayam etan na vidyate / parajñānaṃ bhavasyaiva nirvāṇam iti kathyate.* For contextual discussion and alternative translation, see Makransky, *Buddhahood Embodied: Sources of Controversy in India and Tibet*, 324.

In other words, it's not that we get rid of something (kleśa, aggregates, or saṃsāra) and then have the state of nirvāṇa but, rather, that knowing saṃsāra is what we call nirvāṇa. Note that since Candrakīrti, here and elsewhere, glosses saṃsāra as the five appropriated aggregates, we could also say that nirvāṇa is knowing the aggregates, as opposed to abandoning or eliminating them.[85]

What does it mean to know saṃsāra or to know the aggregates? In typical style, Candrakīrti explains that Nāgārjuna's "knowing saṃsāric existence itself is called nirvāṇa" means not knowing the unborn nature of saṃsāra:[86]

> To know the unborn nature of just that samsaric existence (*srid pa ≈ bhava*) through not knowing it is precisely to know fundamentally (*ngo bo*) the complete pacification of all referents (*mtshan ma≈ nimitta*). Therefore, one should know that, while it is conventionally called 'nirvāṇa,' there is not anything all that is really there.[87]

In other words, here the "object" of knowing is not saṃsāra but the unborn nature or emptiness of saṃsāra. As we saw in the previous chapter, since emptiness is not an object of knowledge but rather a freedom from any knowing, cognizing, or grasping, it makes perfect sense for Candrakīrti to say that nirvāṇa in this sense is known through not knowing.

Let us see if we can dig a bit more deeply into how nirvāṇa can be a matter of knowing. Anne Macdonald has suggested the possibility that, in the *Yuktiṣāṣṭikā*, Nāgārjuna is rejecting an ontologically existent nirvāṇa in favor of a conventional account of nirvāṇa as a "spiritual event."[88] While this interpretation makes sense in the context of these verses, it fits poorly with Nāgārjuna's critique of an existent (*bhāva*) nirvāṇa. One of Nāgārjuna's primary objections to the claim that

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[85] YṢV, 33.

[86] MacDonald, "Knowing Nothing: Candrakīrti and Yogic Perception," 146.

[87] YṢV, 37: *srid pa de nyid kyi ngo bo nyid skye ba med pa yongs su mi shes pa'i tshul gyis yongs su shes pa gang yin pa de nyid mtshan ma thams cad rab tu zhi ba'i ngo bo yin pas tha snyad kyi bden pa dang sbyar nas mya ngan las 'das pa zhes bya ba rang gi ngo bor grub pa ni gang yang med par shes par bya'o.*

[88] MacDonald, "Knowing Nothing: Candrakīrti and Yogic Perception," 143.

nirvāṇa is a *bhāva* is that this would entail that nirvāṇa was conditioned.[89] Wouldn't the same objection apply to the claim that nirvāṇa is an event?

Perhaps we could try to defend this interpretation on the grounds that Nāgārjuna's objections to a conditioned nirvāṇa only apply to an ontologically existent nirvāṇa, which, admittedly, this interpretation denies. Philosophically speaking, however, it is difficult to see why events, spiritual or otherwise, would not still be conditioned, and why that would not still be a problem. Sure, one might quibble that ontological entities or objects *exist* whereas events *happen*, but if there is a problem with saying that nirvāṇa is a conditioned entity, why wouldn't there equally be a problem with saying that nirvāṇa is a conditioned happening?

Or, then again, maybe the point is that *attaining* nirvāṇa is a knowing, not that nirvāṇa itself is mental act. Prima facie this would make more sense in light of the notion, discussed in the previous chapter, that nirvāṇa is emptiness. What we are going to see, however, as we closely analyze Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti's avowed rational for their epistemic take on nirvāṇa, is that this way of reading their view only makes sense up to a point—when we push more deeply, what we will find is that emptiness and knowing cannot be separated into a subject knowing an object known in the way that this interpretation suggests.

So what is Nāgārjuna's rationale for why nirvāṇa should be understood as knowing saṃsāra, as opposed to getting rid of it? At least as he puts it in the *Yuktiṣāṣtikā*, his objection is that if nirvāṇa is the causal cessation of the aggregates then there would be no one left to experience it. Thus we find that, in response to his opponent's assertation that nirvāṇa involves destroying (*rnam par 'jig pa ≈ vināśa*) the aggregates, Nāgārjuna asks:

> [Opponent:] "Cessation is through destruction, not through knowledge of the conditioned."

[89] MMK 25.5.

> [Reply:] For whom[90] would this be a direct perception (*mngon sum ≈ pratyakṣa*),
> how is this destruction known (*zhig shes pa ≈ nāśajña*)?[91]

Insofar as Nāgārjuna's Abhidharma opponent accepts that in the transcendent there is no person or subject, who experiences the transcendent? Who is aware of the destruction of their aggregates? Since the aggregates are necessary for any subjectivity or even awareness, without the aggregates there would be no experience of nirvāṇa.

In his *Yuktiṣāṣṭikā* commentary, Candrakīrti turns Nāgārjuna's question into the following dilemma:

> If cessation is directly perceived (*'gog pa mngon sum du bya ≈ nirodha-sākṣātkāra*) through seeing suchness (*de kho na ≈ tattva*), then there can't be this sort of cessation [which is the destruction of the aggregates] when the aggregates (*phung po*) have not ceased, and when they have ceased, if there is not anyone there, for whom it would be directly perceptible (*mgnon sum ≈ pratyakṣīkṛta*)?[92]

The problem with saying that transcendence is the destruction of the aggregates is that this means that when there are aggregates there is no transcendence, and when there is transcendence there is nobody to experience it.[93]

What are we to make of Candrakīrti dilemma? Since, in Candrakīrti's portrayal of the dialectic, the Abhidharma opponent has already accepted that nirvāṇa involves the destruction of every facet

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[90] The Tibetan here marks the pronoun "who" (*su*) with the *la don* particle, which in many contexts is used to translate a genitive in Sanskrit. Thus, my tentative reconstruction of the Sanskrit is *kasya pratyakṣīkṛta* (in contrast to Kumar's reconstruction of the particle as *kasmin* (Kumar, "The Critical Edition of Yuktiṣaṣṭika-Kārikā of Nāgārjuna," 11; Li and Ye, *Liu shi ru li song*, 18)). As evidence for this, consider how the same translator, Patshab, when rendering MMK 25.24, translates "*kasya*," as "*su la*" (Toh 3860 F.181a).

[91] YṢ 8: *rnam par 'jig pas 'gog 'gyur gyi / 'dus byas yongs su shes pas min / de ni su la mngon sum 'gyur / zhig shes pa de ji ltar 'gyur.*
Following Patshab's translation of the *Kārikā* which reads "known" (*shes pa*), as opposed to Yeshe De's translation of the *Vṛtti* which reads "*ces pa*" (Scherrer-Schaub, *Yuktiṣaṣṭikāvṛtti: Commentaire à La Soixantaine Sur Le Raisonnement, Ou, Du Vrai Enseignement de La Causalité*, 9 & 39).

[92] YṢV, 39: *'di ltar de kho na mthong bas 'gog pa mngon sum du bya dgos na 'gog pa de lta bu de ni phung po ma 'gags pa'i tshe ni med pa 'gags nas ni su yang med na 'gog pa de su la mngon sum du 'gyur.*

[93] MacDonald, "Knowing Nothing: Candrakīrti and Yogic Perception," 152.

of personhood from the physical to consciousness, it seems that his opponent has at least tacitly also accepted that there is no experience of nirvāṇa. Beyond restating the obvious, what additional pressure would this argument put on his opponent?

At first blush, this line of argumentation appears to be an inverted Buddhist version of Epicurus's argument for why we should not fear death. In his *Letter to Menoeceus*, Epicurus writes:

> So death, the most terrifying of all ills, is nothing to us, since so long as we exist, death is not with us; but when death comes, then we do not exist.[94]

The gist of his argument is that we should only be worried about those things that we'll be around to be affected by, and death is not one of them. Epicurus's argument hinges on the premise that, as Martha Nussbaum puts it: "an event can be good or bad for someone only if, at the time when the event is present, that person exists as a subject of at least possible experience."[95] Could Candrakīrti's argument hinge on a similar premise—that nirvāṇa only matters if there is someone who benefits from it?

Hopefully not. As I am about to show, it is difficult to make philosophical sense of such a claim. To begin with, there a plenty of things that matter, that are worthwhile goals to have, which we cannot possibly be around to benefit from or be affected by. Activists fight for a more sustainable planet, we work for the future happiness of our children and their children, old men plant apple trees whose fruit they'll never taste. Why can't nirvāṇa too be one of those worthwhile goals we'll never be around to enjoy? If in even these mundane scenarios it makes sense to work for posthumous goals, it would be odd for Candrakīrti to insist that a practitioner intent on realizing that the self is an illusion should be troubled that we will not be there to enjoy not having a self.

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[94] Epicurus, *Epicurus, the Extant Remains*, 85.

[95] Nussbaum, "The Damage of Death," 27.

Sure, there are goals that are simply impossible to achieve posthumously—athletic feats, chess victories, and sexual escapades, for instance. The reason such goals make no sense as postmortem achievements, however, is that they are constituted by our own mental and physical actions in a way that nirvāṇa, presumably, is not. While nirvāṇa can only be achieved through particular practices, the unconditioned itself is not predicated on any mental or physical action. Unlike winning at chess, there is every reason to think that the unconditioned is possible—perhaps, more possible—in our absence.

At this point, one might make a last ditch objection that there is an important difference between working for future generations and attaining nirvāṇa: unlike postmortem philanthropic goals, if not the practitioner herself, there is no one else who benefits from our nirvāṇa.[96] As such, attaining nirvāṇa without anyone to enjoy it or any consciousness to experience it is more like wanting to be accumulate wealth after one is dead. Would there be any point to accumulating interest in some anonymous bank account, without any person, endowment, or trust fund to benefit from the profits?

But this rebuttal misses the point: nirvāṇa has a negative value. The point is not what nirvāṇa offers us, which, admittedly, is nothing at all since there is no experience of it, but, rather, what it avoids. This posthumous nirvāṇa is worth seeking because it is what allows us to avoid rebirth in saṃsāra. Assuming a materialist conception of death, consider the case of committing suicide to avoid torture. If the torture is bad enough and long enough (let's say unending to make it easy), at a certain point in our thought experiment, suicide seems to have value. Sure, being dead, we have nothing to gain by our self-destruction, but that obviously misses the point, which is what we have

[96] Although this point comes to be challenged in Mahāyāna discussions of the Buddha's nirvāṇa, that reflects their concern with the remarkable effects of the Buddha's actions, and should not be extended to either Abhidharma views of nirvāṇa nor Mahāyāna construals of a *Śrāvaka's* nirvāṇa. See, for example, Makransky, *Buddhahood Embodied: Sources of Controversy in India and Tibet*, 326 ff.

managed to avoid. So too with nirvāṇa. We seem to have landed ourselves in a quandary: if nirvāṇa doesn't need to be experienced to have value, philosophically speaking, what's wrong with thinking that, upon attainment, there is no experience of it?

2.3. Transcending Duality

Then again, perhaps the problem we are coming against is deeper than simply a case of inconclusive reasoning or philological ambiguity. Perhaps the real reason nirvāṇa cannot be separate from knowing has to do with the non-duality of subject and object, emptiness and awareness. Supposing that were true, our inquiry thus far has failed because it started from the assumption that emptiness even made sense without awareness—like Humpty Dumpty, our trouble was with trying to put it back together again.

Let us use this philosophical impasse as a point of departure into distinctly Tibetan ways of thinking about the issue. While at the end of this excursion we will not have a new interpretation that we can plug back into Indian Madhyamaka texts in any historical or philological sense, we will be sensitive to the possibility that the problem with separating empty nirvāṇa from knowing is due to the fact that emptiness and wisdom are two sides of the same coin. Instead of seeing emptiness as the object of knowing, what if, instead, we were to say that emptiness itself is a form of knowing?

Let us return again to the Buddha's first words after his awakening, this time to where he describes it as a "profound (*gambhīra*), peaceful (*śānta*), immaculate (*virajaḥ*), luminous (*prabhāsvaraḥ*) dharma."[97] We've reflected at length on what it meant for the Buddha to say that such a dharma is deathless and unconditioned, but we have yet to consider what it means to be

[97] LV, 25.1.

luminous. Shākya Chokden uses the luminosity described here in the *Lalitavistara* to give an altogether different reading of the claim that nirvāṇa is knowing. Indeed, he takes that puzzling verse of the *Yuktiṣāṣṭikā* in which Nāgārjuna asks who would know nirvāṇa as evidence that the luminosity of the Buddha's first words does not just refer to emptiness as an ontological denial:

> Furthermore, in Nāgārjuna's corpus, when identifying an instantiation (*mtshan gzhi*) of ultimate truth, nirvāṇa alone is explained as the primary instance (*mtshan gzhi*). And nor is that [nirvāṇa] explained just as a non-affirming negation (*med dgag* ≈ *prasajya-pratiṣedha*), for this is rejected in the *Yuktiṣāṣṭikā*. How so? Both in terms of how the position of others is rejected and how his own position is posited. As for the first, in that very text he says:
> "If cessation is through destruction, not through knowledge of the conditioned. For whom would this be a direct perception (*mngon sum* ≈ *pratyakṣam*), how is there this 'destruction' (*zhig ces pa*)?"[98]
> Which is to say that asserting that nirvāṇa is a non-affirming negation contradicts reason and scripture. Firstly, if nirvāṇa is just a non-affirming (*med dgag*) negation that is not conjoined (*zung du mi 'jug pa*) with the wisdom (*ye shes*) knowing that conditioned things are essenceless, it would be impossible for there to be a person directly perceiving it…[99]

The basic structure of the argument is the same here as we found in Candrakīrti's commentary: if nirvāṇa isn't a matter of knowing but, rather, a matter of eradicating, then it can only occur after the aggregates are gone, making it impossible for it to be directly perceived. What's new here is that, for Shākya Chokden, the reason that the opponent is forced into this dilemma is that his

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[98] YṢ 8. Note that Shākya Chokden quotes this verse using Yeshe De's translation of the *Vṛtti* which reads "*ces* pa," instead of the more likely rendering in Patshab's translation of the *Kārikā* which reads "known" (*shes pa*) (Scherrer-Schaub, *Yuktiṣaṣṭikāvṛtti: Commentaire à La Soixantaine Sur Le Raisonnement, Ou, Du Vrai Enseignement de La Causalité*, 9 & 39.

[99] *bang mdzod, ba,* 156: *gzhan yang klu sgrub kyi gzhung du / don dam bden pa'i mtshan gzhi ngos 'dzin pa de srid du/ mya ngan las 'das pa kho na de'i mtshan gzhi'i gtso bor bshad la / de yang med dgag kho na la 'chad pa ni / rigs pa drug cu pa'i gzhung gis gsal bar bkag pa yin no / / ji ltar zhe na/ gzhan lugs 'gog tshul dang/ rang lugs 'jog tshul gnyis kyi sgo nas so / / dang po ni / de nyid las / rnam par 'jig pas 'gog 'gyur gyi / / 'dus byas shes pas ma yin na / / de ni su la mngon sum 'gyur / / zhig ces pa de ji lta bu / / zhes myang 'das med dgag tu 'dod pa la / rigs pa dang 'gal ba dang / lung dang 'gal ba gnyis gsungs so / / dang po ni / 'dus byas rang bzhin gyis med par shes pa'i ye shes dang zung du mi 'jug pa'i spangs pa med dgag de kho na myang 'das yin na / de mngon du byas pa'i gang zag mi srid par 'gyur te.*

Note that Shākya Chokden also reiterates this point elsewhere, notably in his commentary to MMK Ch.25 (*'jug ngogs*, 199 ff).

nirvāṇa is unknowable. And, crucially, the reason it is unknowable is that emptiness has become uncoupled from wisdom. A purely ontological emptiness would be an abstraction outside of any possible experience—the only emptiness that can be experienced is one in which emptiness and experience are not separate.[100]

Think of luminosity (*'od gsal*), clarity (*gsal ba*), and knowing (*rig pa*) as being so fundamentally a part of emptiness that we cannot even say they are separate, while remembering that it is our very inability to grasp their unity that render the ultimate inconceivable (*bsam gyis mi khyab pa*) and inexpressible (*rjod bral*).[101] If it is impossible to express or even fathom how the deathless and unconditioned is also luminous and knowing, that puts the Buddha's reticence to teach his Awakening in a different light. For Tibetan champions of inexpressibility, when the Buddha said: "Were I to teach it to someone else, they would not understand,"[102] he meant that this ineffable unity, unconditioned yet luminously aware, is impossible to conceptualize or put into words.[103]

Returning to the Nāgārjuna's argument for why nirvāṇa must be a matter of knowing the aggregates, not getting rid of them, if we read the *Yuktiṣāṣṭikā* verse the way Shākya Chokden does, the takeaway is that nirvāṇa and its attainment, emptiness and the transcendence of suffering, are not two separate steps or pieces—but, rather, luminous emptiness is the transcendence of

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[100] Objecting to seeing nirvāṇa as a spiritual event on the grounds that it would conditioned seem to apply equally to the claim that nirvāṇa is knowing. Tibetan philosophers were very sensitive to this problem. Some, like Shākya Chokden and Mipham, argued that this knowing must therefore be unconditioned, while others, like Tsongkhapa, dissented, arguing that this proves that nirvāṇa and knowing *are* distinguishable.

[101] Although Shākya Chokden also certainly has a story to tell about how emptiness and experience are a unity, and a good one at that, what I've said here reflects the thinking of Drakpa Gyaltsan and Gorampa, since their approach is more in keeping with how we've been discussing Madhyamaka thus far (see, for example, *ljong shing*, 103). For discussion of Shākya Chokden's position, see Komarovski, *Visions of Unity The Golden Pandita Shakya Chokden's New Interpretation of Yogacara and Madhyamaka*.

[102] LV, 25.1.

[103] See, for example, *bang mdzod, ba,* 155.

suffering. As such, the transcendence of suffering is not something we do or enact but, rather, a state of affairs that is, at it were, already part of our consciousness experience.

3. Conclusion

Returning to our question in this chapter, "what does it mean to transcend saṃsāra," there is a sense in which, for Candrakīrtīit as much as for Vasubandhu, the freedom of nirvāṇa is constituted by the total abandonment (*prahāṇa*) of the suffering aggregates, it's just that now this cessation is already guaranteed by the fact that, ultimately, there are no aggregates. Indeed, both scholars appeal to the following often quoted Sūtra passage to press home the point that nirvāṇa is freedom from the aggregates:[104]

> The total abandonment (*prahāṇa*) of this[105] suffering (*duḥkha*), relinquished (*pratiniḥsarga*), purified (*vyantībhāva*), exhausted (*kṣaya*), passionless (*virāga*), ceased (*nirodha*), pacified (*vyapuśama*), subsided (*astaṃgama*), not connected to (*apratibandhi*) other suffering, unarisen (*anutpāda*), not coming into being (*aprādubhāva = phyis mi skye ba*), that is peace,[106] that is pleasing (*praṇīta*). Namely (*yaduta*), a cessation (*nirodha*) in which all bases (*upādhi = phung po*) are relinquished (*pratiniḥsarga*), craving (*tṛṣṇā*) exhausted (*kṣaya*), passionless (*virāga*) is nirvāṇa.[107]

Candrakīrti, however, uses this passage against his Abhidharma opponents to argue that their view of nirvāṇa falls short of what this passage demands. The Sūtra tells us that nirvāṇa is a freedom

[104] AKbh 93; YṢV 42.

[105] My translation of "this" reflects the *'di* in the passage as quoted in the YṢV Tibetan translation. Pradhan's edition of the Sanskrit of the AKbh, however, has "slightest" (*svalpa*), instead of "this" (AKbh 93.27). Aside from making no sense, since Yaśomitrā reproduces this bit of the quotation as "*khalu*," I suspect that the orthographical similarity of *sva* and *kha* lead to an editorial error. Read as "*yat khalvasya*" (SA 221).

[106] Although the Sanskrit reads "*kāntam*," I have followed the Tibetan (*zhi ba*) in reading this as "*śāntam*" (Toh 4090 F.95b).

[107] As found in AKbh (93) where the original Sanskrit is available: *yat svalpasya* [*khalvasya*] *duḥkhasyāśeṣaprahāṇaṃ pratiniḥsargo vyantībhāvaḥ kṣayo virāgo nirodho vyupaṣamo 'staṅgamaḥ anyasya ca duḥkhasyāpratisandhir anutpādo 'prādurbhāvaḥ / etat kāntam* [*śāntam*] *etat praṇītaṃ yaduta sarvopādhipratiniḥsargas tṛṣṇākṣayo virāgo nirodho nirvāṇam.*

from suffering aggregates and yet the Abhidharma continues to talk about nirvāṇa "with the aggregates" or *sopadhiśeṣa nirvāṇa*. Since the Abhidharma's immanent *sopadhiśeṣa* does not transcend the aggregates, it isn't nirvāṇa—conditioning has not been transcended, the practitioner is not free.[108] As such, what distinguishes Mādhyamikas is not that they walk back from the Buddhist commitment to abandoning saṃsāra but, rather, as Candrakīrti would have it, that they are the only ones who can really take this commitment at face value.

Candrakīrti's point, in a nutshell, is that since nirvāṇa must be understood as freedom from the aggregates, the only way that can make sense is if we find this freedom in the emptiness of the aggregates. If you look for this freedom in the same place you found the aggregates, in the dependently arisen causal structures of life, the nirvāṇa you think you found will turn out to either be something less than freedom from suffering, insofar you are still conditioned, or it will be postponed to a postmortem nonbeing in which "attaining" nirvāṇa makes no sense. So it is that, against the Abhidharma claim that the aggregates are finally and permanently eliminated at death, it is not as if Candrakīrti is somehow salvaging the aggregates, bring them back into our account of what constitutes freedom—his point, rather, is that we never had the aggregates in the first place.

When Candrakīrti uses emptiness to reframe transcendence he leads us directly to what is perhaps the most perplexing dimension of Mahāyāna soteriology, what I will call the "bodhisattva's dilemma:" the tension between the ultimate perspective in which no one has ever suffered anywhere and the conventional fact that we all suffer all the time. That is to say, from a "correct" perspective, there is no suffering and we are already free from conditioning and, yet, there is still a sense in which there is saṃsāra, there is still suffering, and we are still conditioned.

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[108] As Candrakīrti readily acknowledges, however, this Sūtra leaves plenty of room for exegetical wriggling. In fact, as far as he is concerned, the *sopadhi-nirupadhi* distinction itself is a way of wriggling away from the full force of this passage (YṢV, 43).

Were we to lose sight of this point, taking this ultimate perspective as our only perspective, this Mahāyāna reworking of nirvāṇa would fare no better than the Abhidharma's elimination of the aggregates—on neither version would Awakening allow for compassionate engagement with others.[109] The other prong of the dilemma, however, is that if this soteriological claim that there is no suffering is appropriately confined to an ultimate perspective, giving the conventional reality of suffering all the legitimacy it warrants, attaining Candrakīrti's nirvāṇa would seem to leave us stuck in saṃsāra, just as much afflicted by conditioning as the next person. In the next and final chapter, we will turn to tackle this enigma of Mahāyāna Awakening—how to avoid falling into a nirvāṇa in which there are no beings to save or a saṃsāra in which we continue to relentlessly suffer.

[109] As I discuss in Chapter 5 §2.3, it is Drakpa Gyaltsan who develops this problem (*ljong shing*, 83). See also Vose, *Resurrecting Candrakīrti: Disputes in the Tibetan Creation of Prasāṇgika*, 107.

V. Immanence

As always, we begin with the Buddha, here telling Śāriputra that nirvāṇa is nothing other than this body and mind, a theme that will echo through countless other Mahāyāna texts:

> Śāriputra,[1] the eyes are nirvāṇa, there is no nirvāṇa other than the eyes. So it is that the eye and nirvāṇa are non-dual (*gnyis su med pa*), inseparable (*gnyis su dbyer med*). This is equality (*mtshungs pa*).
> Equality in what sense? Equality in the sense that eyes are equal, nirvāṇa is equal. For eyes are without eyes, nirvāṇa without nirvāṇa, eyes are without nirvāṇa, nirvāṇa without eyes. So it is that both eyes and nirvāṇa are the same (*myam pa*) in virtue of being inconceivable.
> Likewise with the ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind.[2]

Here in the *Kuśalamūlasaṃparigraha Sūtra*, the Buddha equates nirvāṇa with the aggregates which are, as we now know, the very stuff of saṃsāra, the very embodiment of suffering. In light of everything we've discussed thus far, to equate nirvāṇa and saṃsāra in this way is perplexing, to say the least. Why is it important for Śāriputra to realize that his body and nirvāṇa are the same, and what could this possibly mean?

Philosophically reflecting on these two intimately connected questions is our task in this chapter, and the final piece of the puzzle we will need to see the "big picture" of Mahāyāna soteriology. After showing how these questions are part of the larger argument I am making in this

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[1] The Sūtra here refers to Śāriputra by his full name "Śāradvatīputra."

[2] *Kuśalamūlasaṃparigraha Sūtra*, F.156b: *sh'a radva ti'i bu / mig ni mya ngan las 'das pa ste / mig las mya ngan las 'das ba gzhan ma yin no // de ltar mig dang mya ngan las 'das pa 'di ni / gnyis su med de gnyis su dbyer med do // 'di ni mtshungs pa ste / mtshungs pa gang gis mtshungs zhe na / mig mtshungs pa dang / mya ngan las 'das pa mtshungs pas mtshungs so // mig la mig med do // mya ngan las 'das pa la mya ngan las 'das pa med do // mig la mya ngan las 'das pa med do // mya ngan las 'das pa la mig med do // de ltar mig dang mya ngan las 'das pa de dag gnyis ka'ang brtag tu med pa nyid kyis mnyam mo // de bzhin du rna ba dang / sna dang / lce dang / lus dang / yid dag la'ang sbyar bar bya'o.*

study, in section one, we will reflect on why Mahāyāna philosophers were so intent to show that saṃsāra and nirvāṇa are not separate. In section two, we will turn to tackle the vexing question of what it might mean to equate freedom from suffering with the aggregates. Finally, in section three, we will see how the takeaway from all this demands that we revise our concepts of immanence.

At first blush, it seems that, for all of our talk of transcendence, at the end of the day, Mahāyāna philosophers are in fact calling for a profoundly immanent affirmation of ourselves and the world. It is no surprise, therefore, that this is how the non-duality of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa often looks when viewed through a contemporary lens. Maybe the non-duality of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa means the final goal at the end of the path is nothing other than where we already are. Accordingly, self-acceptance would be the real wisdom of the Buddha. Or, maybe, this non-duality means returning to the world without our psychological baggage—now wise and unflappable, we reintegrate into everyday life, extraordinary in our ordinariness. Either way, the insight that nirvāṇa is not other than saṃsāra is seen as an affirmation of this world.

Stripped of its romantic undertones, this affirmative view has philosophical teeth.[3] When Nāgārjuna said that nirvāṇa is not different from saṃsāra, his point, according to this way of thinking, was that this world is all there is. Just as the ultimate truth is that there is nothing other than the utterly copacetic conventional, Nāgārjuna's equation of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa is meant to throw us back into the world of dependent origination, as Dan Arnold explains so well:

> Thus, the point of insisting on the "emptiness of emptiness" is to throw us back into the world and to compel the recognition that, although events are dependent, contingent, and conventional, they are, for all that, real. This is the point of Nāgārjuna's famous claim that "there is, on the part of saṃsāra, no difference at all from nirvāṇa." That is, the "ultimate truth" (nirvāṇa) does not consist in something fundamentally different in kind from "conventional" reality

[3] For in-depth discussion of the interplay between romanticism, transcendentalism and Mahāyāna doctrines, see McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*.

> (saṃsāra); rather, what is "ultimately true" is simply the fact that there is nothing fundamentally different from the world as conventionally described.[4]

The final insight and endpoint of the Buddhist path is a resounding affirmation that the world of our ordinary experience is all there is: saṃsāra is nirvāṇa, nirvāṇa saṃsāra—"that is all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."[5]

This view has momentous epistemic implications, for it means that the awakened mind thinks like us and believes like us (minus, of course, the neurosis, addiction, and distraction). This premise that an awakened perspective is, at most, only affectively dissimilar from our perspective is the backbone of Buddhist naturalism and the assumption that encourages us to remake the Buddhist path in our contemporary image. And we can warrant this move epistemologically by appealing to the notion that the conventional reality is the only reality that a Buddha could see. That is, since at the core of Buddhist views of awakening is the idea that seeing the "Truth" is what sets you free, it makes no sense to say that reality is one way, but the awakened experience of it another. Being a Buddha definitionally means seeing how things really are. Yes, Buddhist philosophers debated whether Buddhas perceive conventional truths, but that just proves my point: these controversies hinged on the question of whether conventional truths were true.[6] If they are true, Buddhas must perceive them; if they aren't true, how could Buddhas perceive them? The upshot of this is that

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[4] Arnold, *Buddhists, Brahmins, and Belief: Epistemology in South Asian Philosophy of Religion*, 172. Equally apropos, Huntington draws on Nāgārjuna's claim in MMK 25.19 that nirvāṇa is not different from saṃsāra to conclude:

> What is immediately given in everyday experience is indeed all that there is, for the inherently interdependent nature of the components of this experience *is* the truth of the highest meaning: both the means to the goal (*mārga; upāya*) and the goal itself (*nirvāṇa*) (*The Emptiness of Emptiness: An Introduction to Early Indian Mādhyamika*, 40; 207 fn.71).

For criticism of Huntington's reading of the verse, see Williams, "On the Interpretation of Madhyamaka Thought," 217 fn.17.

[5] Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn," 236.

[6] Thakchoe, *The Two Truths Debate: Tsongkhapa and Gorampa on the Middle Way*.

our perspective can only be the final word on how things are *if* this outlook is ratified by awakened experience.

So too with our naturalistic view of things. It only makes sense to say that naturalism ought to be the blueprint for interpreting Buddhist doctrine if this is borne out in awakened experience. If this were not the case—if what a Buddha perceives is completely at odds with our naturalist framework—then naturalism can hardly be the final word on reality, nor would it make sense to remake the path in our naturalistic image, since that image is part of what is being dismantled. What we would be left with is naturalism as a useful description of how things seem to us—but that much is hardly controversial. Instead, the strong version of Buddhist naturalism essentially holds that the final reality that a buddha sees is precisely the naturalistic world, and nothing more.

In contrast, for Indian and Tibetan philosophers, the non-duality of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa was *not* an affirmation of anything, not of saṃsāra, not of ourselves, not of the world. By seeing that nirvāṇa is not other than saṃsāra, we are meant to be pushed towards a vaster conception of awakening, not preserve something about our present circumstances.

1. The 'Why' Question

Before we get to any of that, however, we need to ask why Mahāyāna thinkers thought it was so important to show that saṃsāra and nirvāṇa are the same. Why, indeed, would any Buddhist want to say that nirvāṇa is not other than saṃsāra? If you're committed to the idea that saṃsāra, the conditioned aggregates, are suffering and you think the point of life is to transcend said suffering, to about-face like this and claim that they are the same thing, in some yet to be defined sense, is profoundly counterintuitive. Although there is an important historical tale to be told here about how Mahāyāna thinkers were positioning their path and their texts in relation to other Buddhist communities, what I am asking is a quasi-philosophical question of why, within the normative

space of Buddhist soteriology, it was important to see that what we are trying to get rid of is not so different from what we are trying to attain.[7]

The avowed purpose of the Mahāyāna path is to become supremely capable in one's compassionate action. As Candrakīrti puts it, if Awakening is the autumn harvest, compassion is the seed with which it begins, the water that sustains it, and the reason it continues to bear fruit.[8] Compassion is the motivation that sets bodhisattvas on their path and the practice that animates their path; compassion also accounts for why Buddhas continue to care for beings, instead of simply passing into oblivion.[9] As such, it provides the basic parameters of the Mahāyāna goal—since the path is the cultivation of the desire to free beings from suffering, for the ends to be commensurate with the means, the result must ease the suffering of others.

The disappearing act of the Arhat entering into a *nirupadhiśeṣa-nirvāṇa* in which there are no aggregates, let alone the capacity to act, is therefore to be avoided at all costs. It would hardly make sense if practicing for the sake of all being resulted in our exiting stage left. And yet, nor

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[7] Walser, *Nāgārjuna in Context: Mahāyāna Buddhism and Early Indian Culture*; Sponberg, "Dynamic Liberation in Yogācāra Buddhism," 57. For more general reflections on why, how, and to what extant Mahāyāna authors sought to set their views apart, see Davids, *Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion as Illustrated by Some Points in the History of Indian Buddhism*; Hirakawa, "The Rise of Mahayana Buddhism and Its Relationship to the Worship of Stupas"; Schopen, "The Phrase *'sa Pṛthivīpradeśaś Caityabhūto Bhavet'* in the *' 'Vajracchedikā'*: Notes on the Cult of the Book in Mahāyāna"; Harrison, "Who Gets to Ride in the Great Vehicle? Self-Image and Identity Among the Followers of the Early Mahāyāna"; Hirakawa, *A History of Indian Buddhism: From Śākyamuni to Early Mahāyāna*; Harrison, "Searching for the Origins of the Mahāyāna: What Are We Looking For?"; Silk, "What, If Anything, Is Mahāyāna Buddhism? Problems of Definitions and Classifications"; Harrison, "Mediums and Messages: Reflections on the Production of Mahāyāna Sūtras"; Nattier, *A Few Good Men: The Bodhisattva Path According to* The Inquiry of Ugra (Ugraparipṛcchā); Drewes, "Early Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism I: Recent Scholarship"; Drewes, "Early Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism II: New Perspectives: Early Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism II"; Drewes, "The Problem of Becoming a Bodhisattva and the Emergence of Mahāyāna"; Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, Ch.9.

[8] See, for example, MABh (LVP) 8. Candrakīrti's discussion of this point is not fully preserved in the extant Sanskrit edition (MABh(X), 3). For discussions of Buddhist notions of compassion, see Jenkins, "The Circle of Compassion: An Interpretive Study of Karuṇā in Indian Buddhist Literature"; Goodman, *Consequences of Compassion: An Interpretation and Defense of Buddhist Ethics*; Jenkins, "Waking into Compassion: The Three Ālambana of Karuṇā"; Williams, *Altruism and Reality: Studies in the Philosophy of the Bodhicaryāvatāra*.

[9] MABh (LVP) 8.

will it suffice to dilly-dally in saṃsāra, restricted by the karmically imposed limitations of one's psychophysical aggregates. Simply living with conditioned aggregates which, of course, is just another name for "saṃsāra," is also not an option because being subject to causes outside of one's control doesn't just result in suffering, as we've already seen in previous chapters, it prevents one from being maximally effective in working for others.

We are told that becoming a Buddha means attaining a "non-located nirvāṇa" (*apratiṣṭhita-nirvāṇa*), neither bound by karmically conditioned aggregates nor extinguished in quiescent peace.[10] The bodhisattva's dilemma is how to avoid the quiescence of nirvāṇa and the suffering of saṃsāra. If bodhisattvas rest in nirvāṇa, there is no conditioning but there are also no beings to save; if they remain in saṃsāra, there are plenty of beings but then bodhisattvas would be subject to all the suffering of conditioning. Even if we understand attaining nirvāṇa epistemically as the experience of emptiness, in the way we saw in the last chapter, the bodhisattva fares no better, for in the perception of emptiness there are no more beings than there would be in the 'blowing out'

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[10] Among many other writers Vasubandhu, author of the MSABh, now speaking in a Mahāyāna context, explains *apratiṣṭhita-nirvāṇa* in such terms (MSABh, 124). In what follows I refer to *apratiṣṭhita-nirvāṇa* as "non-abiding nirvāṇa," rather than as "unstable nirvāṇa," another translation choice, since, as Tillemans has pointed out, unstable nirvāṇa suggests that the attainment is somehow unsteady or shaky. See Takasaki, "*Saṁsāra Eva Nirvāṇam*"; Tillemans, "Review of Wisdom, Compassion, and the Search for Understanding: The Buddhist Studies Legacy of Gadjin M. Nagao. Studies in The Buddhist Traditions," fn.3.

Although, as Alan Sponberg first pointed out in 1979, there continues to be a surprising dearth of academic work on *apratiṣṭhita-nirvāṇa*, despite its centrality to Mahāyāna doctrine, for general discussions of the concept see Obermiller, *Nirvāṇa in Tibetan Buddhism*, 57; Sponberg, "Dynamic Liberation in Yogācāra Buddhism," 60 fn.2, 45, 49 ff.; Nagao, "The Bodhisattva Returns to This World," 62; Makransky, *Buddhahood Embodied: Sources of Controversy in India and Tibet*, 85 ff.; Vose, *Resurrecting Candrakīrti: Disputes in the Tibetan Creation of Prasāṅgika*, 111 ff. Sponberg also points to the concept of *apratiṣṭhita-nirvāṇa* inchoate in the Aṣṭasāhasrikāparamitā, and identifies the MSA as its earliest Yogācāra source (Sponberg, "Dynamic Liberation in Yogācāra Buddhism," 61 fn.8).

As mentioned in the Ch.1 §1.3, for the sake of convenience, I have followed traditional ascriptions of authorship. For discussion of whether, indeed, Vasubandhu, author of the AKbh, also wrote the MSABh, see Frauwallner, *On the Date of the Buddhist Master of the Law Vasubandhu*; D'Amato, "The Mahāyāna-Hīnayāna Distinction in the '*Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra*': A Terminological Analysis," 33–36; Gold, "No Outside, No Inside: Duality, Reality and Vasubandhu's Illusory Elephant," 8 fn.28; Gold, *Paving the Great Way: Vasubandhu's Unifying Buddhist Philosophy*, 159. And, for a general discussion of the place of the MSA and the MSABh in Yogācāra literature, see D'Amato, "Three Natures, Three Stages," 186 ff.

of *nirupadhiśeṣa nirvāṇa*. Eventually, with time and practice, bodhisattvas solve this dilemma by attaining this *non-located nirvāṇa*, freer than anything nirvāṇa could offer, yet unconditioned and more fully entwined with the lives of others than saṃsāra allows. This is what it means to be a Buddha.

So it is that one treads the path to this non-located nirvāṇa by avoiding both the bondage of the conditioned aggregates and the quiescence of their cessation. Since the awakened endpoint is neither in saṃsāra nor nirvāṇa, that goal must be reflected in the sort of path a bodhisattva must follow. Here, as is so often the case, the logic of the path is to mimic the intended result. Since the goal is to be located neither in saṃsāra nor nirvāṇa, the path to that goal consists in avoiding these same extremes. Thus it is, for instance, that the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra* (AA) describes how the bodhisattva steers clear of both cyclic existence and quiescence:

> Not in existence (*bhava*) because of wisdom (*prajñā*), not in peace (*śama*) because of compassion (*kṛpā*).[11]

The bodhisattvas' understanding of emptiness undercuts clinging to saṃsāra while their compassion for others keeps them out of nirvāṇa. And, as with the cause, so with the effect—their balancing act results in the spontaneous effortless activity of the Buddha, ever active, always at peace.[12] This gives us Mahāyāna soteriology in brief—we must avoid the extremes of nirvāṇa and saṃsāra in order to accomplish the goal of non-located nirvāṇa.

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[11] AA 1.10: *prajñayā na bhave sthānaṃ kṛpayā na śame sthitiḥ.* See Nagao's discussion of this phrase as it occurs in the MSA ("The Bodhisattva Returns to This World," 67).

[12] Makransky, *Buddhahood Embodied: Sources of Controversy in India and Tibet*, 85; Dunne, "Thoughtless Buddha, Passionate Buddha," 525. There is some ambiguity in Indian Mahāyāna texts around whether *apratiṣṭhita-nirvāṇa* refers solely to a Buddha's "non-abiding" or also to that of the bodhisattva. This ambiguity is reflected in Tibetan commentarial material with Shakya Chokden (*rol mtsho ka*, 64), for instance, reserving the term for Buddha's alone, whereas Je Tsongkhapa uses the term more liberally to also refer to bodhisattvas (*gser phreng*, 56). Much later, Sonam Drakpa makes this discrepancy explicit but, as if often the case when it comes to Je Tsongkhapa's earliest works, he criticizes the view in *gser phreng*, insisting that the term only applies to Buddhas (*phar phyin spyi don*, 27).

The way to do this, the way to avoid the extremes of nirvāṇa and saṃsāra, is to see that, fundamentally, they are not so different. In a nutshell, this is the philosophical motivation for the Mahāyāna's claim that freedom from suffering is not different from the conditioned aggregates. What is not yet clear, however, is why we need this non-dual insight to avoid these extremes. Located happily in the Midwest, I need no particular insight to avoid the extremes of the East and West coasts, apathy, contentment, and the inertia of habit are perfectly sufficient. Why do bodhisattvas need to see the non-duality of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa to avoid their pull?

1.1. Fixation

A recurring them throughout Mahāyāna path literature is that avoiding the extremes of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa is extremely difficult, in no way analogous to the ease with which I avoid New York and Los Angeles. The reason the bodhisattva's balancing act is so difficult is, apparently, psychological. The idea that saṃsāra is something horrid which ought to be avoided (*heya*) and nirvāṇa is something wonderful which ought to be taken up (*upādeya*) sums up classical Buddhist normativity. Fixating on this distinction means that, even with the best intentions, we will continue to ricochet between the two extremes. As we are about to see, it is our perception of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa as opposites, one nasty and the other delightful, that makes it hard to steer a middle course.

Mahāyāna philosophers were deeply sensitive to this doctrinally enshrined tendency of Buddhists to see nirvāṇa as good and saṃsāra as bad, eventually even specifying, in their systematic presentations of the path, how and by whom it is to be gotten rid of. Gorampa, for instance, whom we already know from previous chapters, tells us that there is a subtle (*phra mo*) attachment to Buddhist soteriological concepts which comes from distinguishing what ought to be avoided (*dor bya* ≈ *heya*) from what ought to be taken up (*blang bya* ≈ *upādeya*). In the context of

considering the whether the perception of sameness is a general feature of the Buddhist path or peculiar to the Mahāyāna, he has an interlocuter ask:

> Isn't the realization of the sameness (*mnyam pa nyid* ≈ *samatā*) of all phenomena an uncommon path to complete Buddhahood?

Gorampa's answer to this question, despite how technical it is, is worth quoting in full:

> There is the sameness of the emptiness of the 1) essence of persons, 2) the essence of things *qua* objects, and 3) those things *qua* subjective features. The *Abhisamayālaṃkāra* explains that the first two are in terms of what is realized by *Śrāvakas* and *Pratyekabuddhas*, respectively. The grasping onto an essence of things [qua subjective features] taught therein, however, is the subtle (*phra mo*) attachment which grasps what ought to be taken up and avoided as separate (*tha dad*). In particular, [this consists in] grasping saṃsāra and nirvāṇa as identifiably (*mtshan ma*) what is to be taken up and avoided, grasping the aggregates as empty, grasping phenomena of the three times as such, grasping the thirty-seven branches of Awakening as the path to liberation, grasping the completely awakened Buddha as a refuge, and so on.[13]

Even without working through everything that he is saying here, Gorampa's point is that there is a "subtle attachment" (*chags pa phra mo*) in the way that we discriminate between the good stuff that we are supposed to attain, accomplish, and venerate on the one hand, and the bad stuff that we are to avoid, discard, and denigrate on the other. This matters because, as we are about to see, if saṃsāra and nirvāṇa are grasped onto as separate, the urge to run away from saṃsāra towards nirvāṇa is simply overwhelming. Since it is a bit more obvious that, in order to not run away from saṃsāra, bodhisattvas should not absolutize its shortcomings, let me, instead, show why avoiding quiescent nirvāṇa was not so easy either.

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[13] *gsung rab dgongs gsal,* 121: *'o na chos kun mnyam pa nyid du rtogs pa rdzogs pa'i sangs rgyas kyi thun mong ma yin pa'i lam ma yin nam snyam na / 'di la gang zag gi bdag dang / gzung ba chos kyi bdag dang / 'dzin pa chos kyi bdag gis stong pa'i mnyam pa nyid gsum las/dang po gnyis nyan thos dang / rang sangs rgyas kyis rim pa bzhin rtogs pa'i dbang du byas par mngon rtogs rgyan las bshad de / de nas gsungs pa'i chos kyi bdag 'dzin ni 'khor 'das la blang dor gyi mtshan mar 'dzin pa dang / phung po stong pa nyid du 'dzin pa dang / dus gsum gyi chos la der 'dzin pa dang / byang phyogs so bdun la thar lam du 'dzin pa dang / rdzogs pa'i sangs rgyas la skyabs gnas su 'dzin pa sogs blang dor tha dad du 'dzin pa'i chags pa phra mo yin la.*

Apparently, the task of avoiding quiescence is difficult. So difficult, in fact, that we are told the Buddha must rouse the most advanced bodhisattvas from their meditative absorptions, else they prematurely sink into the peace of nirvāṇa. The *Daśabhūmika Sūtra*, for instance, describes how the Buddhas urge bodhisattvas to rise from equipoise, enticing them with the prospect of the extraordinary awakened qualities still out of their reach, concluding that:

> If the Bhagavan Buddhas did not cause the bodhisattva to become oriented toward accomplishing all-knowing wisdom, for him there would be just final nirvāṇa (*parinirvāṇa*) and the relinquishment of work for all beings.[14]

In his MABh, Candrakīrti quotes this passage to explain his own pithy verse, in the context of the eighth bhūmi, in which he states that the "conquerors cause them to arise from cessation."[15] As his Tibetan commentators point out, since the bodhisattvas' ability to effortlessly abide for extraordinary lengths of time increases as they near complete awakening, so too does the danger of prematurely attaining nirvāṇa.[16] What emerges in Indian and Tibetan Mahāyāna texts is that, when juxtaposed to saṃsāra in this way, peace becomes the occupational hazard of the aspiring bodhisattva. Even though getting stuck in saṃsāra is equally problematic, in Mahāyāna path literature, it is always nirvāṇa that is the bodhisattva's undoing.[17]

Unlike the self-sacrificing saints of the Western religious imagination, the bodhisattva's altruism often seems to be, in some sense, self-serving. While the question of whether it makes sense to speak of bodhisattvas having a personal agenda (*rang don don gnyer gyi blo*) comes to be

[14] Dbh, 43: *buddhā bhagavantas taṃ bodhisattvam evaṃ sarvajñajñānābhinirhāramukheṣu nāvatārayeyuḥ, tadevāsya parinirvāṇaṃ bhavet sarvasattvakāryapratiprasrabdhiś ca*.

[15] MA 8.2: *rgyal ba rnams kyi 'gog las slong bar mdzod*.

[16] Gorampa, for instance, makes this point in the context of commenting on the AA (*yum don rab gsal*, 49) and on the MA (*ngan sel*, 428).

[17] For many Tibetan thinkers, the so-called "signs of irreversibility" (*avaivartikatā*) of advanced bodhisattvas marks the point at which they can no longer be led astray by nirvāṇa's peace. Likewise, in the *Prajñāpāramita Sūtras*, the Buddha must still caution bodhisattva's not to remain in nirvāṇa.

intensely debated in Tibet, the overarching sensibility is that serving others serves both self and others equally.[18] This is in keeping with the notion that Buddhist "moral philosophy," if that's what we should call it, begins from the utilitarian intuition that creatures—human and otherwise—are rational (though confused) pleasure seekers.[19] Even though we ordinary beings are confused about the causes of happiness, we generally do what we think will make us happy. So too with bodhisattvas.

Since nirvāṇa brings us happiness, avoiding, or even postponing, nirvāṇa goes against our imperative to seek pleasure and avoid suffering. If bodhisattvas are hedonistic, why should they forgo the bliss of nirvāṇa waiting right at their fingertips? Most of us already know the punch line here. Despite all the bliss that nirvāṇa has to offer, the bodhisattva's compassion compels her to seek the "maximal greatness" of a Buddha's awakening, a goal which is both more awesome—replete with ten powers, four forms of fearlessness, and so on—and more effectively alleviates the suffering of the world.[20] This is the bodhisattva's conundrum, that nirvāṇa is blissful yet inadequate while saṃsāra is unsatisfactory yet necessary. In short, as long as there is the assumption that saṃsāra and nirvāṇa are two separate poles, even the best are going to naturally gravitate towards the "extreme" of peace.

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[18] All of this controversy revolves around how to understand why Maitreya bows at the opening of the AA. Rongton critiqued earlier Tibetans for saying that Maitreya bowed both for the sake of others and for himself. His target here may have been either Ngok Lotsawa (*rngog lo' ṭīk chung*, 2) and Ar Byang chub ye shes (*mngon rtogs rgyan gyi 'grel ba rnam 'byed*, 305), both who say as much in their commentaries. Rongton's objection is that Maitreya had no personal agenda or, more literally, no "attitude seeking his own goals" (*rang don don gnyer gyi blo*) (*tshig don rab gsal*, 11). This then provokes Gyaltshab to argue at length for why a bodhisattva must have such an attitude—without it, he argues, seeking the *dharmakāya* makes no sense (*rnam bshad snying po rgyan* vol.1, 17,). See also Gorampa's response in his *yum don rab gsal* (7).

[19] This premise does not mean that Buddhism ethics should be read as a form of utilitarianism (Keown, *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics*, 165; Goodman, *Consequences of Compassion: An Interpretation and Defense of Buddhist Ethics*; Garfield, *Buddhist Ethics: A Philosophical Exploration*, 18).

[20] Dbh, 43. For discussions of "maximal greatness" as a way of understanding the Buddha, see Griffiths, *On Being Buddha: The Classical Doctrine of Buddhahood*, 58; McClintock, "Knowing All through Knowing One: Mystical Communion or Logical Trick in the *Tattvasaṃgraha* and *Tattvasaṃgrahapañjikā*," 231 fn.12.

1.2. A More Abstruse Problem

The idea that nirvāṇa is something other than saṃsāra also leads to the belief that nirvāṇa is ultimately real—anathema for any Mādhyamika. In Bhāviveka's *Prajñāpradīpa*, for instance, we find an interlocuter whose belief that nirvāṇa is ultimately real appears to involve two steps: first, the interlocutor's assumption that nirvāṇa is distinct from saṃsāra leads to the idea that nirvāṇa is something to be obtained.[21] So it is that Bhāviveka's reply is that it would be the case that nirvāṇa is something to be obtained if there were a distinction between saṃsāra and nirvāṇa but, in fact, there is no such distinction:

> Suppose there were such a distinction, evidently one thing would obtain something else, like the hand touching the feet. According to our position, since ultimately saṃsāra and nirvāṇa do not have that kind of form (*rnam pa*), one does not engage in order to attain nirvāṇa.[22]

When Bhāviveka says, "ultimately saṃsāra and nirvāṇa do not have that kind of form (*rnam pa*)," he means that in actuality they do not have the form of two distinct entities.[23] In other words, thinking that nirvāṇa is other than saṃsāra is behind the intuition that nirvāṇa is to be obtained.

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[21] It is worth noting that the Vaibhāṣika arguments in the AKBh against the Sautrāntika claim that nirvāṇa does not exist have much the same flavor as Bhāviveka's opponent, if not precisely the same content (AKBh, 93).

[22] PrPr, f.238a: *'dir bshad pa / khyad par yod na ni gzhan gyis gzhan 'thob pa mthong ste / dper na / lag pa rkang par slebs pa lta bu yin na / kho bo cag gi phyogs la don dam par 'khor ba dang mya ngan las 'das pa dag la rnam pa de lta bu med pas mya ngan las 'das pa thob par bya ba'i phyir 'jug pa med do.*

[23] This is clear from the context. Bhāviveka uses this as preamble to MMK 25.19 where Nāgārjuna denies that saṃsāra and nirvāṇa are distinct. To paraphrase what follows the quote above, why don't saṃsāra and nirvāṇa have that kind of form? Because there is no difference between saṃsāra and nirvāṇa' (PrPr, f.238a).

In his commentary to this passage, Avalokitavrata's clarification of the formal structure of Bhāviveka response speaks directly to my point. To wit, since the opponent's reason for why nirvāṇa must be real is that it is something that it is to be obtained, by denying that nirvāṇa is, in fact, to be obtained, Bhāviveka is showing that the reason is unsound. Or as it is put within the canons of Indian logic, that the evidence is "unestablished" (*asiddha-hetu*) (PrPrṬ.3 f.260b).

The second and fatal step that pushes the interlocuter to assert that nirvāṇa is ultimately real is his assumption that intelligent people only desire real things. We see this through the voice of the interlocuter who objects:

> Nirvāṇa must exist ultimately (*don dam par*) since those frightened of birth, aging, and death enter [the path] in order to attain it. We don't see the elite (*khyad par can*) entering in order to attain something nonexistent, like the hair of a tortoise. Since the elite begin to meditate on the path in order to obtain nirvāṇa, therefore, nirvāṇa must exist ultimately.[24]

The claim here is that nirvāṇa must exists ultimately (*don dam par yod pa*) since the "elite," the worthies in our own camp or "yogis," enter the path in order to obtain nirvāṇa.[25] The point being that only a fool would set out to attain something that isn't real. In other words, to recap how the opponent gets led astray: the first wrong step was to imagine that, since it is separate from saṃsāra, nirvāṇa is something to be obtained; the second wrong step was to then think that nirvāṇa must be ultimately real, since it doesn't make sense to obtain something illusory.

For Bhāviveka and other Mādhyamikas, this is a philosophically grave error since, for them, the whole point is to avoid this sort of ultimate entity; particularly when it comes to things at the heart of the Buddhist liberative project. After all, their claim to fame is that their deconstructive analysis spares nothing, especially the cherished beliefs of Buddhism itself. A moment's reflection on why Mādhyamikas are most interested in negating what is most cherished reveals the thinness of any distinction between saṃsāra-nirvāṇa dualism as a philosophical problem as opposed to a

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[24] PrPr, F.238a: *'dir smras pa / don dam par mya ngan las 'das pa ni yod pa kho na yin te / skye ba dang rga shis 'jigs pa rnams de thob par bya ba'i phyir 'jug pa yod pa'i phyir ro // med pa la khyad par can rnams de thob par bya ba'i phyir 'jug pa ma mthong ste / dper na rus sbal gyi sbu bzhin no // mya ngan las 'das pa la ni de thob par bya ba'i phyir de khyad par can rnams lam sgom pa la 'jug pa yod pas de'i phyir / don dam par mya ngan las 'das pa ni yod pa kho na yin no.*

[25] Avalokitavrata plausibility glosses "elites" (*khyad par can*) as "yogis" (*rnal 'byor pa*) (PrPrṬ.3 f.260a).

soteriological one—the reason to question the reality of our most cherished beliefs is to stop grasping which, of course, is for the sake of nirvāṇa.

2. Non-duality of Saṃsāra & Nirvāṇa

Now that we have seen why experiencing saṃsāra and nirvāṇa as separate was a problem for Mahāyāna philosophers, we can begin to understand what they meant when they denied this separation. As I promised at the outset, carefully reflecting on what they meant will have a twofold payoff. The first is to expose the gap between contemporary immanent appropriations of this idea and what we find in Mahāyāna philosophical texts. What we are about to find is that, even though the meaning changes in different philosophical contexts, on no interpretation is the idea to reaffirm saṃsāra. The second payoff is that, eventually, we're going to see how these Mahāyāna ideas of sameness point to the way in which freedom from suffering is constituted by the transformation of our conditioned aggregates. The upshot of all this speaks directly to the bodhisattva's dilemma: it's not that she comes out of her experience of the ultimate to find herself stuck right back where she was but, rather, she awakens to find her own embodied existence transformed beyond recognition.

Our task of excavating these Mahāyāna conceptions of non-duality will proceed in three steps. First, we will consider the idea that the sameness of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa is to be found in the perception of emptiness. Second, we look at how an even more intimate unity is revealed in the inseparability of form and emptiness. Third and finally, we will step away from these Madhyamaka approaches to consider, instead, a Yogācāra notion of transformation.

Before we get into these details, however, let me be even more explicit about why what we said in the previous section demands this denial of duality. There we saw how experiencing

saṃsāra and nirvāṇa as separate is bad for bodhisattvas; now we're exploring what Buddhist philosophers thought we should do about it. The way for the bodhisattva to stop experiencing saṃsāra and nirvāṇa as separate is, perhaps predictably, to see their sameness, as the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra* puts it:[26]

> The *Perfection of Wisdom* (*prajñāpāramitā*) is considered to be neither located (*sthita*) on the near shore nor the far shore, nor between them, because of knowing the sameness (*samatā*) of the [three][27] times.[28]

The bodhisattva's realization of sameness (*samatā*) allows her to avoid being "located" anywhere—not in the near shore of saṃsāra, not in the far shore of nirvāṇa, nor anywhere in between.[29] In case we were tempted to imagine this lack of location spatially, Ārya Vimuktisena (ca. early 6th c.), the first of the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra*'s great commentators, specifies how the *Perfection of Wisdom* keeps the bodhisattva away from these extremes by allowing her to free herself from the discrimination (*'du shes = saṃjñā*) and perception (*dmigs pa ≈ upalambhana*) of them as different.[30] In other words, the way we avoid saṃsāra and nirvāṇa is by overcoming our discrimination of them as different. *And*, the way to do that is by understanding their sameness.

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[26] Sthiramati's commentarial discussions of Vasubandhu's non-located nirvāṇa is another (SŪbh, F.140b). For discussion, see Nagao ("The Bodhisattva Returns to This World," 67).

[27] The Sanskrit only has time (*adhvana*) in the plural, I have supplied "three" based on Haribhadra's commentary (AAsa, 48) and the Tibetan translation (AA(Tib), 28.

[28] AA 3.1: *nāpare na pare tīre nāntarāle tatoḥ sthitā / adhvanāṃ samatājñānāt prajñāpāramitā matā.*

[29] This is in contrast to the AA verse discussed earlier (1.10) where it was compassion that keeps one out of saṃsāra. That said, however, Haribhadra reads this verse in conjunction with 1.10, explaining that compassion prevents nirvāṇa and wisdom prevents saṃsāra. According to his gloss, the realization of the sameness is the reason why the Perfection of Wisdom is considered (*mata*) near (*āsanna*) to the Buddhas and bodhisattvas, not the reason for non-abiding (AAsa, 48). This is in contrast to Vimuktisena's interpretation I present here.

For discussion of the realization of sameness (*samatā*), see Makransky, *Buddhahood Embodied: Sources of Controversy in India and Tibet*, 101.

[30] Ārya Vimuktisena brings out this epistemic dimension in his commentary to this verse, explaining that bodhisattvas are not located in the sense that, by seeing everything as the same, they avoid the discrimination (*'du shes = saṃjñā*) and perception (*dmigs pa ≈ upalambhana*) of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa (AAv, F.113a). For discussions of Ārya Vimuktisena (not to be confused with Bhadanta Vimuktisena), see Ruegg, *The Literature of the Madhyamaka School of Philosophy in India*, 100; Nakamura, *Indian Buddhism: A Survey with Bibliographical Notes*, 260; Makransky, *Buddhahood Embodied: Sources of Controversy in India and Tibet*, 111 & 111 fn.9.

In a way that is easily misunderstood, the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra* and other Mahāyāna texts explain this absence of discrimination as a perception of sameness (*samatā*), a practice that latter commentators will call the "*yoga of the sameness of existence and peace*" (*srid zhi mnyam nyid kyi sbyor ba*).[31] This *yoga of sameness* is introduced in the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra* through the analogy of a dream:

> Because things are like a dream, existence (*bhava*) and peace (*śānta*) are not conceived (*akalpanā*).[32]

We will get into the details a bit further along but, for now, this much is clear and, it would seem, consistent across many Mahāyāna texts: the sameness of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa has more to do with transcending the concept of difference than with any metaphysical intuition of underlying sameness. Indeed, sameness, or its Sanskrit cognate *samatā*, may not be about finding a common thread at all but, rather, consist in letting go of the notion of difference.[33] As such, this "not seeing" ofdifference is itself the *yoga of sameness* (*srid zhi mnyam nyid kyi sbyor ba*).[34]

Note further that in the many commentarial discussions of this verse, the sameness of the three times does not seem to mean anything more than the sameness of all that is included in the three times, which is to say everything. We can see this, for instance, in Haribhadra's gloss of "times" (*adhavan*) as "things of the three times" (*traiyadhvikānān dharmmāṇām*) (AAsa, 48).

[31] Haribadhra is one of many commentators who frame the issue in terms of *samatā* or sameness (AAsa, 84). Referring to this as the yoga of the sameness of existence and peace (*srid zhi mnyam nyid kyi sbyor ba*) is standard among Tibetan AA commentators (*tshig don rab gsal*, 338; *gter gyi kha 'byed*, 262).

[32] AA 4.60: *svapnopamatvād dharmāṇāṃ bhavaśāntyor akalpanā*. According to its commentators, each verse of the AA refers to particular passage of the *prajñāpāramitā sūtras*. In the case of this particular verse, Haribhadra identifies a passage of *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā* (4, 178-179; AAA, 728).

[33] In the more technical path language of Tibetan AA commentators, at issue here is the bodhisattva's experience of upon reaching the so-called "pure bhūmis" (*dag sa*), i.e. eighth b*hūmi* and up. Since at this point the bodhisattva has no concept (*kalpanā*) of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa in or out of meditative equipoise, she does not see them as separate (*tshig don rab gsal*, 338; *gter gyi kha 'byed*, 262).

[34] *tshig don rab gsal*, 338; *gter gyi kha 'byed*, 262; *rgyan 'grel*, 436.

2.1. Non-difference from the ultimate perspective

The most straightforward and influential way of thinking about the unity of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa is from the perspective of ultimate truth. In one of the most celebrated verses of the MMK, already referenced in passing above, Nāgārjuna writes:

> There is no distinction whatsoever between saṃsāra and nirvāṇa. There is no distinction whatsoever between nirvāṇa and saṃsāra.[35]

Although Nāgārjuna says this in the context of talking about the unanswered questions we were discussing earlier, here pointing out that, just as the Tathāgata cannot be said to either exist or not exist after nirvāṇa, the same applies while he still remains on earth, we should not think that he means anything less than he says—there is no distinction whatsoever between the two.[36]

As always when reading Nāgārjuna, however, we should be attentive to the way in which, more often than not, he is talking in the context of the way things really are or, as we put in earlier chapters, 'ultimate analysis.'[37] Although not one to specify which of his claims were from the perspective of which truth, his commentators certainly agreed that *this* claim—that saṃsāra and

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[35] MMK 25.19: *na saṃsārasya nirvāṇāt kiṃcid asti viśeṣaṇam / na nirvāṇasya saṃsārāt kiṃcid asti viśeṣaṇam.* Translation by Siderits and Katsura, *Nāgārjuna's Middle Way:* Mulamadhyamakakārikā, 302. Walser, *Nāgārjuna in Context: Mahāyāna Buddhism and Early Indian Culture*, 164.

[36] As Candrakīrti's commentary makes even clearer, both this verse and 25.20, the equally famous verse that whatever is the limit of nirvāṇa is the limit of saṃsāra, are to be read in light of the unanswered questions (PsP, 535). When we read the verses in conjunction with what comes before and after, the point is that, just as the four lemmas regarding nirvāṇa after death are impossible (25.17), they are also equally inapplicable to the Bhagavan remaining (*tiṣṭhamāna*) here in the world prior to nirvāṇa (25.18). Therefore, when it comes to whether any of the four lemmas makes sense, there is no difference between saṃsāra and nirvāṇa (25.19), which is to say that what is an unacceptable lemma for the one, is an unacceptable lemma for the other (see also Siderits and Katsura, *Nāgārjuna's Middle Way:* Mulamadhyamakakārikā, 301–3). For further commentarial discussion along similar lines, see BP, 356; PrPr, 238b; and YṢV, 49.

[37] This is particularly true when reading the MMK, less so in the RV, for instance. For a useful overview of the RV, see McClintock and Dunne, "Introduction"; for discussions of the authorship of the RV, see Walser, *Nāgārjuna in Context: Mahāyāna Buddhism and Early Indian Culture*, 271 ff.

nirvāṇa are not different—is to be understood in the context of ultimate truth.[38] As Buddhapālita (ca. 500) put it:[39]

> For this reason, since all things are the same (*mnyam pa nyid ≈ samatā*) insofar as they are unborn (*skye ba med pa*) and unceased (*'gag pa med pa*), there is no distinction (*khyad par ≈ viśeṣaṇa*) whatsoever between saṃsāra and nirvāṇa. Just as there is no distinction (*khyad par ≈ viśeṣaṇa*) whatsoever between saṃsāra and nirvāṇa, likewise, there is no distinction whatsoever between nirvāṇa and saṃsāra.[40]

It is within the space of the unborn, where all fabrication is primordially ceased, that there is no difference between saṃsāra and nirvāṇa. Buddhapālita's point is not to affirm that their respective non-arising is the same but, rather, to deny that there is anything to differentiate them. To this Candrakīrti only adds that it is when saṃsāra and nirvāṇa are analyzed (*vicar*) that they are the same (*tulya*), reinforcing the idea that this non-difference is an ultimate sort of non-difference.[41]

By way of explanation, Candrakīrti likens this lack of difference to the empty space of two containers (*snod ≈ bhājana*), even though one container is distinct from another, the space within them is not:[42]

> For instance, even though a pot and a bowl and such are different, the space within them is undifferentiated, since it is equally unobstructed. Likewise, even though things such as form and feeling are different, since their thusness (*de kho*

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[38] BP, 356; PrPr f.238a; and PsP, 535.

[39] Ruegg, *The Literature of the Madhyamaka School of Philosophy in India*, 60.

[40] BP, 356: *de'i phyir chos thams cad skye ba med pa dang / 'gag pa med pa mnyam pa nyid kyis 'khor ba ni mya ngan las 'das pa las khyad par cung zad kyang yod pa ma yin no / ji ltar 'khor ba mya ngan las 'das pa las khyad par cung zad kyang yod pa ma yin pa de bzhin du mya ngan las 'das pa yang 'khor ba las khyad par cung zad kyang yod pa ma yin no.*

[41] PsP, 535. For Candrakīrti, conventional truths are not to be analyzed, for analysis is what shifts our perspective from working with conventions to knowing their nature (MABh(P), 279). See Williams, "On the Interpretation of Madhyamaka Thought," 217 fn.17.

[42] MABh(LVP), 356. McClintock, "Knowing All through Knowing One: Mystical Communion or Logical Trick in the *Tattvasaṃgraha* and *Tattvasaṃgrahapañjikā*," 227.

Candrakīrti also makes a similar point, albeit in a far more technical way, in his commentary to the YṢ, in the context of explaining how, when Āryas perceive emptiness, there are no distinctions between the Four Noble Truths and, therefore, that the Abhidharma notion of the path of seeing (*darśanamārga*) as a sequential realization of each of the Truths cannot be accepted literally (YṢV, 50).

> *na nyid*), characterized as non-arisal, is undifferentiated, thusness (*de kho na nyid*) should be understood as one taste.[43]

It might seem as if Candrakīrti's only point here is that sameness is constituted by the fact that space is equally unobstructed (the defining characteristic of space) and emptiness is equally without arising.[44] And, at first blush, this might seem like something of a trick, saṃsāra and nirvāṇa are only the same, it would seem, insofar as they share the property of not being real.[45] In fact, however, what Candrakīrti is pointing us to is the way in which, ultimately, there is no difference, no arising, nothing to differentiate saṃsāra and nirvāṇa.[46]

We are now in a position to see why this talk of sameness is not some sort of incipient monism, as if emptiness were an underlying reality unifying all apparent phenomenal diversity, perhaps not so different from the Vedānta notion that difference is superimposed on an essential oneness.[47] As we have just seen, the point here is that in emptiness there are no differences, not that there is

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[43] MABh(LVP), 356: *dper na bum pa dang 'khar gzhong la sogs pa tha dad kyang sgrib pa med pa nyid du mtshungs pa'i phyir der gtogs pa'i nam mkha' la tha dad pa med pa de bzhin du / gzugs dang tshor ba la sogs pa'i dngos po tha dad kyang der gtogs pa'i de kho na nyid skye ba med pa'i mtshan nyid can la tha dad pa med pas de kho na nyid ni ro gcig pa kho nar shes par bya'o.*

Even though Candrakīrti's point here is that knowing the emptiness of one thing entails knowing the emptiness of all things, as Jayānanda points out, this in turn comes back to the claim that there is no difference in the emptiness (MAṬ, F.353a) (McClintock, 229 & 230).

[44] McClintock, 227 fn.5. The pot analogy may also shed light on Bhāviveka's otherwise cryptic comment on MMK 25.20, in which he says that the extremes (*koṭi*) of nirvāṇa and saṃsāra are the same, like space, for even though there are different locations (*phyogs*) of space, their defining characteristics (*mtshan nyid* ≈ *lakṣaṇa*) are indistinguishable (*dpyer med*) (PrPr, f. 238b). Elsewhere Bhāviveka uses a seemingly similar analogy but through the mouth of his Vedāntin opponent who compares the Atman to the space in the pot. When the pot breaks the space becomes indistinguishable (MH 8.11: *ghaṭākāśavadekasya nānātvaṃ cedabhedataḥ / ghaṭabhedena caikatvaṃ sāmyaṃ sarvasya yanmatam*).

[45] Cf. McClintock, 227 ff.

[46] This point comes out particularly clear in Candrakīrti's description of perceiving emptiness (MABh(LVP), 111).

[47] Mohanty, *Classical Indian Philosophy*, 89; McClintock, "Knowing All through Knowing One: Mystical Communion or Logical Trick in the *Tattvasaṃgraha* and *Tattvasaṃgrahapañjikā*," 226. For relevant discussions of monism in Buddhist thought, see Nagao, "'What Remains' in Sunyata," 76 fn.35; King, *Buddha Nature*, 100; McClintock, "Knowing All through Knowing One: Mystical Communion or Logical Trick in the *Tattvasaṃgraha* and *Tattvasaṃgrahapañjikā*," 226; Duckworth, *Mipam on Buddha-Nature: The Ground of the Nyingma Tradition*, xxxii&200 fn.91.

something shared between the emptiness of one thing and the emptiness of another.[48] Within the experience of emptiness there simply are no distinctions between things—just as whatever it is that distinguishes you and me (physical characteristics, mental properties, DNA) disappears upon ultimate analysis, so too with saṃsāra and nirvāṇa. From this perspective, the urge to leave saṃsāra in order to attain nirvāṇa appears to be making a big deal of out of nothing insofar as, in reality, there is no difference between them.

2.2. Form & Emptiness

What we've said thus far might show that ultimately there is nothing distinguishing saṃsāra and nirvāṇa, but, insofar as nothing can ultimately be distinguished, it doesn't suggest that they share any more of an intimate connection than anything else.[49] Sure, for Mādhyamikas, nirvāṇa is not ultimately different from saṃsāra, but neither is the moon ultimately different from Lake Superior. There is also another sense in which nirvāṇa is not separate from saṃsāra, however, also found in Madhyamaka texts, that does suggest a more intimate unity between saṃsāra and nirvāṇa.

Over the course of the last several chapters, we have seen how, in Indian Madhyamaka texts, the concept of nirvāṇa often overlaps with emptiness, even while retaining at least some soteriological connotations. What we have yet to attend to is the way in which, similarly, saṃsāra can also stand-in for conventional truth to such an extent that the opposition of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa simply refers to the Two truths.[50] In short, sometimes "saṃsāra" is just a way of talking about dependent arising; sometimes "nirvāṇa" is another word for emptiness. Unsurprisingly then, in

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[48] The notion that in emptiness there are no differences is a common theme in Mahāyāna literature far beyond the confines of Madhyamaka texts (e.g. RGV 1.28, AA 1.39).

[49] Siderits and Katsura, *Nāgārjuna's Middle Way:* Mulamadhyamakakārikā, 303.

[50] Consider, for example, YṢV, 48.

these texts, the inseparability of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa, at points, is nothing less than the unity of form and emptiness; or, in the hands of Tibetan philosophers, the unity of the two truths (*bden gnyis bzung 'jug*).

When we think about saṃsāra and nirvāṇa as dependent arising and emptiness, what kind of unity does this entail? In what sense would nirvāṇa not be other than saṃsāra? Arising without a *svabhāva* and arising dependently are two sides of the same coin—to arise from a cause *is* to not arise from a *svabhāva*, as Nāgārjuna puts it in MMK 7.16:[51]

> Whatever arises in dependence, that is pacified (*śānta*) of *svabhāva*. Therefore, the presently arising is pacified (*śānta*), as is the act of arising itself.[52]

A point which, in his YṢV, Candrakīrti uses to explain why nirvāṇa is not other than saṃsāra:

> In that [verse] it states that presently arising and the act of arising *without inherently arising* is the meaning of 'dependent arising.' Since suffering is also dependently arising, it is not arisen from a *svabhāva*. Whatever does not arise inherently is nirvāṇa, since both [suffering and nirvāṇa] are unarisen.[53]

To arise dependently is to arise without a *svabhāva*, which is to say that while any dependently arisen thing arises, it does not arise inherently. So it follows that suffering does not arise inherently (in virtue of being dependently arisen). Candrakīrti's point here, however, is transitive: since a) dependently arising is the same thing as not inherently arising and b) not inherently arising is the

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[51] Nāgārjuna famously makes the same point in MMK 24.18ab: *yaḥ pratītyasamutpādaḥ śūnyatāṃ tāṃ pracakṣmahe.* PsP, 504. For discussions of the relation between dependent arising and emptiness, see Napper, *Dependent-Arising and Emptiness: A Tibetan Buddhist Interpretation of Madhyamika Philosophy Emphasizing the Compatibility of Emptiness and Conventional Phenomena*; Lopez, "On the Relationships of Emptiness and Dependent Arising: Some dGe-Lugs-Pa Views"; Garfield, "Dependent Arising and the Emptiness of Emptiness: Why Did Nāgārjuna Start with Causation?"; Arnold, *Buddhists, Brahmins, and Belief: Epistemology in South Asian Philosophy of Religion*, 162 ff.; Siderits, *Personal Identity and Buddhist Philosophy: Empty Persons*, 164 fn. m.

[52] MMK 7.16: *pratītya yad yad bhavati tat tac chāntaṃ svabhāvataḥ / tasmād utpadyamānaṃ ca śāntam utpattir eva ca.* "Act of" is indebted to Siderits and Katsura, *Nāgārjuna's Middle Way:* Mulamadhyamakakārikā, 81.

[53] YṢV, 48: *'di la skyes par gyur pa dang / / skye ba ngo bo nyid kyis skye ba med pa gang yin pa rten cing 'brel bar 'byung ba'i don du gsungs so / / sdug bsngal yang rten cing 'brel bar 'byung ba yin pas rang bzhin gyis ma skyes pa'o / / gang gis ngo bo nyid kyis skye ba med pa de nyid mya ngan las 'das pa ste / gnyi ga yang ma skyes pa'i phyir ro.*

same as nirvāṇa, it follows that there is an identity between dependently arising and nirvāṇa. If the thrust of his argument was not already clear, Candrakīrti's concludes with Nāgārjuna's dictum, discussed earlier, that there is no difference between saṃsāra and nirvāṇa.[54]

Let's take stock of the sort of unity this give us. The inseparability of dependent arising and emptiness is more than simply the claim we discussed in the previous section that all differences are dissolved in emptiness. When the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras* say, for instance, that "form is emptiness, emptiness itself is form" (*rūpaṃ śūnyatā śūnyataiva rūpam*), they are not just saying that ultimately there is no form to be distinguished from anything else.[55] The point, rather, is that form and emptiness cannot be understand as ontologically separate entitles. Although this is not to say they are the same thing—at the very least, in anachronistically Fregean terms, the two concepts do not have the same sense.[56] Somehow or another, in ways that Buddhist philosophers have endlessly picked apart and reformulated, there is an ontological intimacy in which form and its emptiness contain each other so entirely that the one cannot be entirely separated from the other.[57] We must not think that things exist somehow separate from their emptiness; nor should we imagine "emptiness" as something other than that which is empty.

In Tibetan Madhyamaka, this is the so-called "unity of the two truths" (*bden gnyis zung 'jug*), apex of the view, bone of contention for later polemics.[58] We will get to the contested part shortly

[54] Candrakīrti concludes the above line of reflection by quoting MMK 25.19 and 20 (YṢV, 48).

[55] HS, 98. Lopez, *The Heart Sūtra Explained:Indian and Tibetan Commentaries*, 57–93. Note that this claim is not peculiar to the HS but, rather, a staple of the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature (e.g. PVS 1, 64).

[56] Siderits, "The Sense-Reference Distinction in Indian Philosophy of Language," 84.

[57] Lopez, *The Heart Sūtra Explained:Indian and Tibetan Commentaries*, Ch.5; Newland, *The Two Truths in the Mādhyamika Philosophy of the Ge-Luk-Ba Order of Tibetan Buddhism*; Duckworth, "Two Models of the Two Truths: Ontological and Phenomenological Approaches"; Thakchoe, "How Many Truths? Are There Two Truths or One in the Tibetan Prāsangika Madhyamaka?"; Thakchoe, *The Two Truths Debate: Tsongkhapa and Gorampa on the Middle Way*; Thakchoe, *The Two Truths in Indian Buddhism: Reality, Knowledge, and Freedom*.

[58] It is noteworthy that, for all of his efforts to show emptiness is not other than dependent arising and that nirvāṇa is not other than saṃsāra, Candrakīrti does *not* make this point about the two truths. I suspect the reason for this is that,

but, first, here's the intuition in a nutshell: Appearance and emptiness are not two separate things—what appears is empty and what is empty appears. For all that basic unity, however, we perceive appearances but not emptiness. That psychological limitation on our part is what we call "confusion" (*'khrul ba*); and what is perceived through the filter of this confusion is conventional truth. Even though we experience conventional objects as existing, perhaps as physical, certainly as having various attributes, properties, and qualities, if we look more closely, we find none of this, not the object, nor its attributes, nor even its negation. When, as the result of practice, we eliminate that confusion, we perceive emptiness or ultimate truth.

The trick, however, is that if we really got rid of the confusion which causes us to see appearances without seeing emptiness, there is not going to be any difference between seeing appearances and seeing emptiness. Since emptiness and appearance are not two separate things, to truly perceive the way things are, we must perceive emptiness and appearance in a way in which there is no distinction between them.[59] To put it a now familiarly paradoxically way, to truly perceive the two truths is to not perceive two truths, insofar as what separates into two is part of the confusion to be transcended. When that happens, you are a Buddha. And, crucially, when that happens, there are not two truths.

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for him, the idea of Two truths refers to two epistemic contexts, as opposed to metaphysical entities. For the Tibetan usage, see, for example, *ngan sel*, 347 and Thakchoe, *The Two Truths Debate: Tsongkhapa and Gorampa on the Middle Way*, Ch.1.

[59] Shakya Chokden puts it this way:

> The meaning of equality is this: since what appears is empty and what is empty appears, under the influence of a confused and unconfused subjectivity, the object, appearing and empty, is divided into conventional and ultimate truth. However, in reality (*don*), there is no division between appearance and emptiness, for, as it is said, 'form is empty, emptiness is form,' and so on. (*rgyan 'grel*, 436: *mnyam pa'i don ni / snang bzhin du stong / stong bzhin du snang bas yul can 'khrul pa dang ma 'khrul ba'i dbang gis / yul snang ba dang stong pa kun rdzob dang don dam gnyis su phye ba yin gyi / don la snang stong dbyer med yin te / gzugs stong pa'o // stong pa nyid gzugs so // zhes sogs gsungs pas so // zhes bzhed*).

If there aren't in fact two realities, if emptiness and form are not, ontologically, separate things, what is the division of the two truths based on? This presented a puzzle for Buddhist philosophers: Are there two realities or one reality understood in two ways? Then again, others argued, perhaps specifying either sameness or difference would betray the very insight the two truths are intended to illuminate.[60] One influential way to answer this question, put forward by Je Tsongkhapa, is to try to show how they are parallel features of every object. Everything has a conventional dimension or nature (*rūpa*), in which there is an object with properties and attributes; and an ultimate nature (*rūpa*), found through not finding any of these properties under ultimate analysis.[61]

Drakpa Gyaltsan and later Sakya scholars like Gorampa took a different tack. In reality there aren't two truths, it only seems that way because we aren't able to see the whole picture, because confusion inhibits our perception of emptiness such that we experience appearance without emptiness. What was not separate becomes bifurcated into what we perceive and what we don't. In the language of Tibetan scholasticism, this point comes down to the basis (*dbye ba'i gzhi*) upon which the two truths distinction is made.[62] As Drakpa Gyaltsan and Sakya Pandita put it, the two

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[60] *dbu ma spyi don*, 77.

[61] This sort of interpretation inevitably goes back to MA 6.23 (and MABh(LVP), 102), although Candrakīrti's point that the Two truths emerge from different ways of seeing can also be taken as an indication that the distinction is a difference in perspective, not different features of a single object (e.g. *ngan sel*, 346-347).

In Tibet, Je Tsongkhapa developed this idea into his hallmark claim that the two truths are ontologically identical but phenomenologically distinct (*ngo bo gcig ldog pa tha dad*) (Thakchoe, *The Two Truths Debate: Tsongkhapa and Gorampa on the Middle Way*, 18).

[62] *ljong shing*, 84. The basic issue Tibetan philosophers disagreed over was whether the Two truths dichotomy carves up reality as opposed to being merely a reflection of our epistemic limits, which, in the language of Tibetan scholasticism, was hashed out in terms of whether it is a division of what is known (*shes bya*) or a reflection of confused "worldly cognition" (*'jig rten pa'i blo*). As Gorampa puts it:

> In this Madhyamaka tradition there is no objective division (*yul rang ngos nas*) into Two truths but, rather, conventional truth and ultimate truth are divided in terms of false seeing and correct seeing, or confused and unconfused, or deluded and undeluded, or erroneous and nonerroneous, or valid and invalid ways of seeing a single appearing thing (*snang ba'i dngos po*). (*dbu ma spyi don*, 72: *dbu ma'i gzhung lugs 'dir ni yul rang ngos nas bden pa gnyis su dbyer med kyi snang ba'i dngos po gcig la'ang yul can brdzun pa mthong ba dang/ yang dag mthong ba gnyis sam/'khrul ma 'khrul gnyis sam/_rmongs ma rmongs gnyis sam/ phyin ci log ma log gnyis sam/tshad ma yin*

truths are presented from the perspective of ordinary or worldly cognition (*'jig rten pa'i blo*). Incidentally, this is a point they gleaned from their reading of precisely the passages of the YṢV we discussed in Chapter Three where Candrakīrti explains that the distinction between saṃsāra and nirvāṇa is made for ordinary beings blind to the empty reality of things.[63] To say there are two truths is just to say that there is the way things seem to us ordinary folk and then there is the way it would seem to an Ārya experiencing emptiness.

Therein the dichotomy of two truths emerges—the ultimate truth we do not experience and the conventional truth that we do.[64] The obvious upshot of thinking about the two truths in this way is that the distinction itself only applies to us, people who haven't perceived emptiness. From the admittedly unfathomable perspective of Āryas, reality is not carved into two truths since the carving itself is purely a reflection of our epistemological limitations. In other words, this distinction we are making between two ways of seeing only makes sense in terms of our cognitive deficiency. There are two truths because there are biologically conditioned and psychology shortsighted creatures like us who see the leaves fall, feel the wind on their faces, shiver with cold

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> *min gnyis kyis mthong tshul gyi sgo nas kun rdzob bden pa dang/ don dam bden pa gnyis su phye ba ste.*)

Gorampa's discussion of this point offers perhaps the clearest indication of the overwhelming influence of Drakpa Gyaltsan on his presentation of Madhyamaka. In effect Gorampa's account of the Two truths situates Drakpa Gyaltsan's work within the new polemical context of arguing against Je Tsongkhapa (*dbu ma spyi don*, 69 ff). For discussions of Gorampa's view of the Two truths see Thakchoe, *The Two Truths Debate: Tsongkhapa and Gorampa on the Middle Way*; Kassor, "Thinking the Unthinkable / Unthinking the Thinkable: Conceptual Thought, Nonconceptuality, and Gorampa Sonam Senge's Synopsis of Madhyamaka," Ch.2.

[63] YṢV, 37; *ljong shing*, 84. As Sakya Pandita puts it: "The two truths are presented with respect to worldly cognition (*'jig rten pa'i blo*)" (*thub pa dgongs gsal*, 337: *bden pa gnyis su 'jog pa de ni 'jig rten pa'i blo la ltos nas 'jog go*). The term "worldly cognition" (*'jig rten pa'i blo*) in this context is in contrast to the transcendent cognition (*'jig rten las 'das pa'i blo*) of Āryas. Following their lead, Gorampa also makes the same point (*dbu ma spyi don*, 69). Even more to the point, Shakya Chokden says that the division is made in terms of our grasping onto saṃsāra as something to be discarded and nirvāṇa something to be obtained (*bang mdzod*, *ba* 13). See also Thakchoe, *The Two Truths Debate: Tsongkhapa and Gorampa on the Middle Way*, 15.

[64] Drakpa Gyaltsan makes this point in the context of responding to an interlocuter who, referencing BCA 9.2 (*buddher agocaras tattvaṃ*), asks how we can say the Two Truths are from a worldly perspective, since the ultimate is not the object of worldly cognition (*ljong shing*, 84).

but remain blind to the emptiness of those leaves, the wind, and the cold. If we were not confused, there wouldn't be two truths. Since the very notion that there are two truths, two ways of seeing, is a product of our confusion, for someone who is awake, there is no such distinction.

Some pieces are still missing for us to get from this point to our soteriological concerns. True, as we saw in Chapter Three, even when we take "nirvāṇa" to refer to emptiness *simpliciter*, it already has a genuine sense of freedom. There is, indeed, a sense in which, for Mādhyamikas, freedom from saṃsāra is nothing other than the reality that there is no kleśa, nor karma, nor suffering. This only gets us so far, however. Our basic question throughout has been what it means to be free of suffering. As important as these insights are, they do not directly speak to that question. Returning again to the structure of the Four Noble Truths, what we need to understand is how the Truth of Cessation (where we are headed) is not other than the Truth of Suffering (where we are coming from).

This is where Tibetan philosophers offer a great deal when they distinguish an overtly soteriological version of emptiness, which we first encountered in Chapter Three. Although Tibetan commentators do not shy away from the idea that emptiness is nirvāṇa, they would add that it only truly warrants this appellation once the illusions of kleśa have been swept clear. Even though, in purely ontological terms, we all already have nirvāṇa insofar as, in reality, none of us have ever suffered, the norms and nomenclature of Buddhist path literature are such that we don't, strictly speaking, call this "nirvāṇa" until we get to the point that we are no longer under the illusion that we suffer so. Imagine you mistakenly think you have a disease although, in reality, the lump is only a bruise, the black spot only an ink stain. Even though you have no sarcoma or melanoma, now that you've told everyone you're sick, nothing is going to change in the loose parlance of everyday-talk until you realize your mistake. Likewise, even though ultimately an Arhat never had

kleśa, it is only when she is able to deprogram herself from even the illusion that she has attachment, greed, and so on, that this aboriginal absence unequivocally qualifies as nirvāṇa. It is only at this point that it makes sense to say that she has "attained" nirvāṇa and "eliminated" kleśa, even though, in reality, nothing has budged.

With this clarification in hand, what does the so-called "unity of the two-truths" (*bden gnyis bzung 'jug*) add to our exploration of what it means for nirvāṇa to not be different from saṃsāra? Just as the distinction between the two truths reflects only the fact that we ordinary folks don't experience emptiness, the idea that nirvāṇa is something other than saṃsāra only makes sense from this shore, in the terms of that limited perception of ourselves as conditioned and suffering. The point here is that the epistemic shift which, Candrakīrti has been telling us, constitutes the "attainment" of nirvāṇa doesn't just leave behind the ideas that we have kleśa and are suffering, it also transcends the distinction between suffering and not suffering.

To get a sense of what this lack of distinction might mean, practically speaking, let us return to the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra's* "*yoga of sameness*" we discussed earlier. The way Rong ston and Gorampa put it, the bodhisattva gets to a point when she no longer thinks conditioned suffering aggregates and the freedom from suffering are distinct (*tha dad*), not while she is meditation on emptiness but also not while she is out tending the garden.[65] In other words, not only is there ultimately no distinction between saṃsāra and nirvāṇa (as we saw in the previous section), since the distinction itself is a product of our own misunderstanding, it falls away as one progresses along the path. Although, presumably, there were some pre-Pythagorean stargazers who thought the Morning Star and Evening Star were two separate things, since this idea was the product of a

[65] While this becomes controversial in Tibet, Rong ston and Gorampa maintain that eventually bodhisattvas have no thought (*rtog pa*) of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa as different (*tha dad*) even when they are not in equipoise on emptiness (i.e., even during *rjes thob*) (*tshig don rab gsal*, 338; *gter gyi kha 'byed*, 262).

astrological ignorance we've moved beyond, we no longer think that way. Perhaps, we might imagine, it is a similar perception of the distinction between saṃsāra and nirvāṇa as vacuous that constitutes the bodhisattva's *yoga of sameness*?

2.3. What's Left?

From what we've found thus far through reflecting on Madhyamaka ideas about the non-duality of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa, there is no affirmation of saṃsāra or the world. Since, for Mādhyamikas, nirvāṇa comes out of the recognition that saṃsāra is fundamentally and primordially dissolved in the unborn unceasing emptiness of all things, there is no return to the here and now, the ordinary and natural, who we are and what we think. When they talk about nirvāṇa not being different from saṃsāra, they are pointing us towards a perspective that is to be found on the other shore, at the end of the path or very near so, in which even the most basic distinction between saṃsāra and nirvāṇa has been transcended. Crucially, however, from such a perspective, there is no saṃsāra, let alone the sort of immanent affirmation of this life that some might have imagined.

To put the same point in more explicitly Madhyamaka terms, ultimate truth is *not* the realization that there is nothing but conventional truth, nirvāṇa is *not* the realization that there is only saṃsāra. Just as Candrakīrti argues that, when we analyze the way things really are, even the very thing we are talking about, the logical subject or *dharmin* of our argumentation, disappears, so too when we "attain" nirvāṇa—fully internalizing our insight into emptiness—there is no

saṃsāra.[66] The Āryas cognitive insight into the nature of reality does not affirm, ratify, or even perceive conventions. More controversially, nor does the awakened perception of Buddhas.[67]

What I am saying here lands us at the hard problem of Madhyamaka thought. If, in the final version of nirvāṇa, the unsurpassable awakening of the Buddha, there is no return to, or affirmation of, saṃsāra, is anything left at all? Are there any appearances? Or, to put it differently, does the Buddha's experience have any content? The content of our perceptions and concepts, what Mādhyamikas call "conventions" or *saṃvṛtti*, are products of confusion. Just as a psychedelic hallucination is only perceptible for as long as we are under the influence of the hallucinogen, the stuff we see is only perceptible for as long as we are confused. No confusion, no object of confusion.[68] The obvious upshot of this view is that upon awakening, when even the traces of

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[66] PsP(M), 175. Although the semantic interpretation often makes it sound as if the realization of the ultimate truth is a realization that there is only conventional truth, Indian and Tibetan interpreters of Madhyamaka generally agreed that the Ārya's meditative equipoise could not see conventions—since anything perceived at that level of analysis would definitionally be an ultimate truth (MacDonald, "Knowing Nothing: Candrakīrti and Yogic Perception," 144 & 148).

For discussion of the commonly appearing *dharmin*, see Yoshimizu, "Reasoning-for-Others in Candrakīrti's Madhyamaka Thought," 436.

[67] The question of whether Buddha's perceive convention was a source of considerable controversy in Tibet. See Vose, *Resurrecting Candrakīrti: Disputes in the Tibetan Creation of Prasāṇgika*, 126 ff; Almogi, *Rong-Zom-Pa's Discourses on Buddhology: A Study of Various Conceptions of Buddhahood in Indian Sources with Special Reference to the Controversy Surrounding the Existence of Gnosis (Jñāna: Ye Shes) as Presented by the Eleventh-Century Tibetan Scholar Rong-Zom Chos-Kyi-Bzang-Po*.

[68] Putting it this way is contentious. While Candrakīrti at times seems to say as much (MA 6.28), Je Tsongkhapa argued for a distinction between the wrong sort of cognitions (i.e. *bden 'dzin*) that are eliminated along the path and the correct cognition of conventions that one would continue to have even after having transcended all confusion (*dgongs pa rab gsal*, 231). Even though Gorampa had much to say against this interpretation, he too found a way of preserving a certain kind of conventional truth even in the absence of confusion (*dbu ma spyi don*, 269).

confusion have been eliminated, there would be no perception of conventions.[69] Left as it stands, it doesn't seem like Candrakīrti's Buddha is going to perceive anything.[70]

While this is certainly a credible reading not lacking in textual support, if it were true, it would seem as if Candrakīrti has slid off of his own middle way.[71] If the whole reason for his Mahāyāna goal was to avoid the quiescence of *nirupadhiśeṣa-nirvāṇa*, this isn't a promising start. It would seem as if there is an obvious and overwhelming sense in which nirvāṇa *is* other than saṃsāra, in the sense that, at the end of the path, one attains a nirvāṇa in which there simply is no saṃsāra. Even more troubling, as Drakpa Gyaltsan points out, how would such a view of awakening allow for the non-located nirvāṇa the whole point of which, at least as I have been letting Mahāyāna texts tell the story, was to avoid the extremes of nirvanic quiescence and saṃsāric conditioning?[72]

2.4. Transformation

The solution to the hard problem of how awakened experience can have all the content that, it would seem, the Mahāyāna path demands is found in the idea of "transformation." Yes, right now the content of our experiences are products of our confusion, well deserving their appellation as *saṃvṛtti* or "obscuring;" but what is to say that this need necessarily be the case? In keeping with

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[69] This question of whether Buddhas perceive conventions is often hashed out in terms of the problem of Awakened language use. How could a Buddha teach or even communicate in the absence of any perception of conventions? The sort of audience-specific dialogue of the Sutras certainly make it seems as if the Buddha knew who he was talking to. As important as this is for Mahāyāna credibility, the Buddha not perceiving conventions also poses this more basic ontological problem (Dunne, "Thoughtless Buddha, Passionate Buddha"; D'Amato, "Why the Buddha Never Uttered a Word").

[70] Dunne, "Thoughtless Buddha, Passionate Buddha"; Vose, *Resurrecting Candrakīrti: Disputes in the Tibetan Creation of Prasāṇgika*, ch.5; MacDonald, "Knowing Nothing: Candrakīrti and Yogic Perception," 164 ff.

[71] For another version of the philosophical problems at stake here, consider Burton's argument that the Mādhyamika's solution may end up being "liberation by annihilation" (Burton, "Knowledge and Liberation: Philosophical Ruminations on a Buddhist Conundrum," 336).

[72] *ljong shing*, 83. See Vose for Drakpa Gyaltsan's treatment of this problem (*Resurrecting Candrakīrti: Disputes in the Tibetan Creation of Prasāṇgika*, 107).

Buddhist philosophical optimism about the possibilities of transformation, why can't appearances too transform? As such, the way "out" of saṃsāra is to transform these appearances, not get rid of them. Nirvāṇa is not other than saṃsāra because the stuff of saṃsāra is transformed into the stuff of nirvāṇa. Unpacking just what that means will be our final exegetical task.

Before we can really make sense of this idea of transformation, however, we need to start thinking about saṃsāra and nirvāṇa as permutations of our experience. There is no better way of doing this than to reflect on the dream analogy we encountered earlier in the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra's* introduction to the *yoga of sameness*: just as a dream and waking are not different, so too with saṃsāra and nirvāṇa. Although, admittedly, there is nothing obviously illuminating about the idea that a dream and waking are not different—they certainly *seem* different—let us consider what might be the most straightforward interpretation. Waking and dreaming are the same because they are both states of consciousness, as Haribhadra explains:

> As the result of comprehending that saṃsāra and the purified (*vaiyavadānika*), the ailment (*vipakṣa*) and antidote (*pratipakṣa*), are similar to a dream in that they are by nature mere appearances (*pratibhāsamātra*), there is no conceptualization of difference (*nānātva*) between saṃsāra and nirvāṇa. Such is the meaning of sameness (*samatā*).[73]

In a dream, all things—saṃsāra and nirvāṇa included—are mere appearances, without any objective mind-independent reality. So construed, the similarity (*sadṛśa*) of waking to a dream (*svapna*) consists in also having a nature (*svabhāva*) which is a mere appearance (*pratibhāsamātra*).[74]

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[73] AAsa, 84: *sāṃsārikavaiyadānikavipakṣapratipakṣāṇāṃ pratibhāsamātrasvabhāvasvapnasadṛśatvena avagamāt saṃsāranirvāṇayor nānātvenāvikalpanam iti samatā /.* Haribhadra also makes the same point in his lengthier discussion of this dream analogy in his *Āloka* (AAA, 729).

[74] AAsa, 84.

As various *Abhisamayālaṃkāra* commentators continued to ruminate on how dreaming and waking illuminate the *yoga of sameness*, the analogy exposes the way in which awakening is constituted by a change in the content of one's experience. This line of thought reaches its apotheosis in the writings of the 11th philosopher century Ratnakīrti, a commentator so near the terminus of Indian Buddhist scholasticism he nearly misses inclusion into later Tibetan exegesis.[75] Commenting on the verse from the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra* in which existence and peace are likened to a dream, he tells us that the dream of saṃsāric appearances is replaced by the waking appearances of the Buddha:

> "Existence"[76] refers to the appearances to an afflicted mind which takes the form of the three realms. "Peace" refers the appearance to an unafflicted mind which takes the form of the *Dharmakāya*, *Sāmbhokakāya*, and *Nirmāṇakāya*, especially to the completely fully Awakened Buddha. "Non conceptualization" of these refers to not knowing a distinction between them. For its nature (*bdag nyid*) is enveloped (*byin gyis brlabs ≈ adhiṣṭhita*) in emptiness, nothing more than the mind appearing to itself. Hence the meaning is an awareness of sameness. Why so? Because things are like a dream. The mental appearances when awake are like a dream, for in a dream, when hands, cows, and so forth are perceived while sleeping they appear as mind. Since things too are similar to that, they are altogether beyond their ordinary identity. The intention is that one who knows this is a Buddha.[77]

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[75] Ruegg, "On Ratnakīrti," 300; Goodman, "A Buddhist Proof for Omniscience: The 'Sarvajñasiddhi' of Ratnakīrti"; Patil, "On What It Is That Buddhists Think About —"*Apoha*" in the '<i>Ratnakīrti-Nibandhâvali'</i>"; Patil, *Against a Hindu God: Buddhist Philosophy of Religion in India*, 4; Kuijp, *Contributions to the Development of Tibetan Buddhist Epistemology: From the Eleventh to the Thirteenth Century*, 278.

[76] Although the text here reads *sred pa*, I am reading it is a *srid pa*, since here Ratnakīrti is glossing *bhava* (*srid pa*) in AA 4.60 (AAkk, F.238a).

[77] AAkk, F.238a: *srid* [*sred*] *pa zhes pa ni nyon mongs pa dang bcas pa'i khams gsum pa'i rnam pa'i sems su snang ba'o / / zhi ba zhes pa ni chos dang longs spyod dang sprul pa'i sku gsum gyi rnam pa nyon mongs pa med pa'i sems su snang ba ste / khyad par du yang dag par rdzogs pa'i sangs rgyas zhes brjod do / / de dag tu rtog pa med pa ni dbye bar mi shes pa ste/ stong pa nyid kyis byin gyis brlabs pa rang rang gi sems su snang ba tsam gyi bdag nyid yin pa des na spyi'i shes pa'i zhes pa'i don to / / de ltar yin pa ci'i phyir zhe na/ chos rnams rmi lam lta bu nyid kyis so / / sad pa'i gnas skabs kyi bdag nyid kyi sems kyi snang ba rnams rmi lam lta bu ste / rmi lam ni gnyid kyi gnas skabs la nye bar dmigs par gyur pa na lag pa dang glang po la sogs pa'i rnam pa sems su snang ba'o / / chos rnams kyang de dang de 'dra ba nyid kyis tha mal gyi rang bzhin las ring du 'das pas de rtogs pa nyid ni sangs rgyas zhes dgongs pa'o.*

Just as, when the confusion of sleep clears, the appearances to the dream mind give way to the appearances of waking life, awakening is constituted by the appearances of saṃsāra giving way to the appearance of an awakened Buddha.

As opposed to the ideas we've been considering thus far that sameness is found in emptiness, here sameness is constituted by the fact of being a mere appearance. Just as a dream is nothing but a mental apparition, so too with what we experience in everyday waking life.[78] The fact of being a mere appearance is what constitutes sameness—dream girls and dream demons are the same in virtue of being nothing but a mental appearance, so too with our waking experiences. To be clear, if we stop with just what Haribhadra and Ratnakīrti give us here, it seems like we're back to the idea that saṃsāra and nirvāṇa are the same because they share some very general, perhaps meaninglessly general, property. To see how this phenomenological turn gives us far more than that, however, we now need to tackle the notion of transformation head-on.

Let us turn to the Yogācāra concept of *āśrayaparāvṛtti* or the "transformation of the basis," for here we shall find that the concept of transformation is articulated with particular subtlety.[79] We are not just talking about change—the fact that at one moment we have state *x* and at the next

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[78] The fact that now the dream analogy has taken on the Yogācāra sense that Candrakīrti's objects to so vociferously is not surprisingly in light of the way in which *Abhisamayālaṃkāra* and its commentaries delicately straddle both Yogācāra and Madhyamaka streams of thought (Makransky, *Buddhahood Embodied: Sources of Controversy in India and Tibet*, 110 ff. & 213).

[79] Yogācāra texts refer both to *āśrayaparāvṛtti* and *āśrayaparivṛtti* (Davidson, "Buddhist Systems of Transformation: *Āśraya-Parivṛtti/-Parāvṛtti* among the Yogācāra," 8 & 152; Sakuma, "The Historical Development of the *Āśrayaparivṛtti* Theory," 40). Note that, although I focus exclusively on the Yogācāra iteration of *āśrayaparivṛtti*, there are also important precedents for this concept in Abhidharma literature (Szanyi, "The Changing Meanings of *Āśraya* in Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośa(Bhāṣya)*"; Davidson, "Buddhist Systems of Transformation: *Āśraya-Parivṛtti/-Parāvṛtti* among the Yogācāra," 156 & 160 ff). For relevant discussions of *āśrayaparivṛtti*, see Obermiller, *Nirvāṇa in Tibetan Buddhism*, 43; Davidson, "Buddhist Systems of Transformation: *Āśraya-Parivṛtti/-Parāvṛtti* among the Yogācāra"; Sakuma, "The Historical Development of the *Āśrayaparivṛtti* Theory"; Sponberg, "The *Trisvabhāva* Doctrine in India and China: A Study of Three Exegetical Models," 100. For considerations of *āśrayaparāvṛtti* in a Buddhist epistemological context, on the other hand, see Eltschinger, "Études Sur La Philosophie de Dharmakīrti (II): L' *Āśrayaparivṛtti*"; Eltschinger, "Dharmakīrti and His Commentators' Views on the Transformation of the Basis and the Status of the *Ālayavijñāna*," 44.

moment we have state *y*, in the way, for instance, elected officials replace their predecessors. When we talk of transformation, there is a third entity, *z*, that undergoes the transformation. As such, this *z* is *x* today but would be *y* tomorrow. However, the claim that there is a third entity underlying *x* at t_1 and *y* at t_2 does not by itself capture what is distinctive about transformation either, particularly since this much is a standard feature of Tathāgatagarbha thought.

What is distinctive about *āśrayaparāvṛtti* is that what we are trying to get rid of is not ontologically distinct from what is being transformed. Or, at least, this is how Asanga, often considered a "founder" of Yogācāra, puts it in his *Mahāyānasaṃgraha* (MSG).[80] Not only is there

[80] While discussions of *āśrayaparāvṛtti* are found through many strata of Yogācāra texts, in what follows I confine myself to Asanga's MSG. What to make of *āśrayaparāvṛtti* depends entirely on whether one adopts the so-called "pivot" model or the "progressive" interpretation of the Three Natures. At stake in these rival interpretations is whether the *paratantra* "pivots" (*parāvṛtti*) from an unreal dualist mode of being (*parikalpita*) to a perfect one (*parniṣpanna*) (Sponberg, "The *Trisvabhāva* Doctrine in India and China: A Study of Three Exegetical Models," 100). While it is generally acknowledged that both models were accepted by at least some Yogācāra interpreters in some places, whether in India, China, or Tibet, the debate continues over which model best characterizes which strata of Indian Yogācāra text (Sponberg, "The *Trisvabhāva* Doctrine in India and China: A Study of Three Exegetical Models"; Nagao, "The Buddhist World-View as Elucidated in the Three-Nature Theory and Its Similes"; Nagao, "The Logic of Convertibility"; D'Amato, "Three Natures, Three Stages"; Brennan, "The Three Natures and the Path to Liberation in Yogācāra-Vijñānavāda Thought"). My textual choice is particularly significant since the MSG is where we see the pivot model most clearly, in contrast to MSA/Bh, for instance, where the perception of emptiness destroys (*kṣaya*) the *parantra* (MSABh,169; D'Amato, "Three Natures, Three Stages," 199; Brennan, "The Three Natures and the Path to Liberation in Yogācāra-Vijñānavāda Thought," 632; Tzohar, *A Yogācāra Buddhist Theory of Metaphor*, 181). As such, my discussion of *āśrayaparāvṛtti* reflects the MSG and the pivot model evinced therein.

Against this current of evaluating the appropriateness of either model on a text-by-text basis, Powers has argued the pivot model is simply not found in Indian Yogācāra (Powers, "Can Ultimate Reality Change? The Three Natures/Three Characters Doctrine in Indian Yogācāra Literature and Contemporary Scholarship," 50). My discussion of *āśrayaparāvṛtti* in the MSG can be read as evidence against his claim, although it should be noted that Powers' rejection of the pivot model is largely motivated by the fact that, in Indian Yogācāra texts, the *parniṣpanna* is an ultimately real state of affairs, not a state that one 'arrives at' or perfects (Powers, 54). Although this is true—and a point that earlier pivot proponents may well have lost sight of—it is orthogonal to the question of whether the *paratantra* pivots from the *parikalpita* to the *parinispanna.* Since by all accounts the *parikalpita* is unreal, even on a pivot model, the *parinispanna* is an unchanging suchness not brought about by the meditator's activity. (In other words, since, ontological speaking, there never was any *parikapita*, the *parinispanna* has always been as it is.) The same point applies to Powers' objection to translating *parinispanna* as 'perfected.' As I have tried to make clear, Mahāyāna philosophers delighted in sewing what is supposedly accomplished through practice into the fabric of reality. So it is, for instance, that Asanga equates the *parinispanna* part of the *paratantra* with *nirvāṇa*—if we can't call *parinispanna* "perfected," by the same logic, we should not call it "nirvāṇa" either (MSG(L), 39).

For historical discussion of Asanga, see Frauwallner, *On the Date of the Buddhist Master of the Law Vasubandhu*; Hakamaya, "On a Paragraph in the *Dharmaviniścaya* Chapter of the *Abhidharmasamuccaya*"; D'Amato, "Three Natures, Three Stages," 187; Walpola Rāhula, Abhidharmasamuccaya*: The Compendium of the Higher Teaching (Philosophy)*, xiii.

a third entity, *z*, underlying *x* at t_1 and *y* at t_2, but there is an ontological identity of *z* and *x* in the sense that *x* is simply a misperception of *z*.[81] In other words, *x* is not other than *z* in the same sense that, even when a stick half submerged under water looks crooked, ontologically speaking, the crooked stick is nothing other than the actual one.

To explain this sense of transformation, Asanga gives the analogy of an auriferous lump of earth. Though in fact gold, before the smelting process it seems like nothing but clay. As we dig into this analogy, bear in mind that since the "earth element" (*pṛthivīdhātu*) under discussion, what I am calling the "lump," is definitionally whatever is hard (*khara*), it includes both clay and gold:[82]

> So, for example, in a lump of earth in which there is gold there is a perception of three things: the earth element, the clay, and the gold. In such a case, the clay which doesn't exist in the lump of earth is perceived whereas the gold which does exist there is not perceived. Once it has been burnt[83] by the fire it does not appear, but the gold does appear. The appearance of the earth element as clay is an erroneous appearance. When appearing as gold, it appears the way it is. Therefore, the earth element includes both.[84]

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[81] There is also an ontological identify of *z* and *y* but, as we have seen, that in itself is fairly standard. As Sakya commentators like Gorampa realized, there is a way in which this notion of *āśrayaparāvṛtti* also makes good sense in a Madhyamaka context, out of place though it may seem in Candrakīrti's texts: Saṃsāra (*x*), rightly understood, is emptiness (*z*), which, in turn, is nothing other than nirvāṇa (*y*).

[82] Asvabhāva makes this point in his commentary (MSGUb, F.232a: *sa'i khams ni sra ba nyid do*). Furthermore, if we accept traditional ascriptions of authorship, we also find Asanga talking about the earth element in precisely these terms in his AS:

> What is the earth element? It is hardness. (F.46a: *sa'i khams gang zhe na / sra ba nyid do*).

This definition of earth is a standard feature of Buddhist scholasticism (e.g. AK 1.12, AKBh, 8). On Asanga's authorship of the AS, see Hakamaya, "On a Paragraph in the *Dharmaviniścaya* Chapter of the *Abhidharmasamuccaya*," 468; Walpola Rāhula, Abhidharmasamuccaya*: The Compendium of the Higher Teaching (Philosophy)*, xx; Bayer, "Gateway to the Mahāyāna: Scholastic Tenets and Rhetorical Strategies in the 'Abhidharmasamuccaya'".

[83] Note that although D and other Tibetan translations read "touched by fire" (*mes reg*), Lamotte supplies "burnt" (*sreg*) based on the Chinese translation of the MSG. Since being touched (*reg*) by fire is a well attested phrase, without further evidence, it isn't obvious that "burnt" (*sreg*) is preferrable.

[84] For an alternative translation and discussion of this example see Powers (Powers, "Can Ultimate Reality Change? The Three Natures/Three Characters Doctrine in Indian Yogācāra Literature and Contemporary Scholarship," 62) but also Nagao ("The Buddhist World-View as Elucidated in the Three-Nature Theory and Its Similes," 10). MS(L), 39: *dper na sa khong na gser yod pa la ni sa'i khams dang sa dang gser dang gsum dmigs so / / de la sa'i khams la ni med pa'i sa dmigs la / yod pa'i gser ni mi dmigs te / 'di ltar mes sreg na sa ni mi snang la gser ni snang ngo / / sa'i*

In this analogy, though there seems to be three things, the lump, the clay, and the gold, in fact, since the lump is misperceived as clay but is actually gold, there is only one thing, the lump which is non-other than the gold. The structure of transformation is this: the lump of earth is what is transformed into gold. Since the clay (x) is simply a misperception of the lump of earth (z), it has no separate physical reality. The physical identity of the lump, clay, and gold matters for how we go about getting gold—if we caste aside the clay in our search for gold, we would end up emptyhanded.

Asanga goes on to unpack the analogy, explaining that our conscious experience is like the earth element—before it is touched by the fire of non-conceptual wisdom, its appears dualistically; after, it appears without duality.[85] And, yet, crucially, attempting to attain the non-duality of nirvāṇa elsewhere is futile—the dualism of the present is the very stuff of nirvāṇa.

What I want us notice here is that this is not just the Tathāgatagarbha-style claim that awakening is like removing impurities from gold.[86] Despite claims to the contrary, here in the analogy, there are not two things, clay on the one hand, gold on the other, such that the former is either covering or adulterating the later.[87] As the above passage makes clear, the clay does not exist in the lump whereas the gold does.[88] Here the point is that, since what seems to be just clay is in fact gold, the transformation is not accomplished by scraping away the clay to find the gold.

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khams ni sar snang ba na log par snang ngo / / gser du snang ba na de bzhin du snang ngo / / de bas na sa'i khams ni gnyi ga'i char gtogs pa'o.

[85] MSG(L), 39.

[86] In the RGV, the simile of gold in filth, underscores the lack of identity between gold and that which covers it (RGV, 1.96. *aśucau suvarṇam*).

[87] While Powers argues that in the analogy the dross is real, the text is explicit that the clay in question is absent from the clump of earth (Powers, "Can Ultimate Reality Change? The Three Natures/Three Characters Doctrine in Indian Yogācāra Literature and Contemporary Scholarship," 62).

[88] MS(L), 39: *de la sa'i khams la ni med pa'i sa dmigs la.*

Rather, in the heat of non-conceptuality, the clay itself "transforms" into gold in the very specific sense that we are finally able to see that it was gold all along.

So, with this earthy analogy in hand, how are we to characterize *āśrayaparāvṛtti*? In the MSG, Asanga defines *āśrayaparāvṛtti* as the transformation consciousness undergoes when, through practice, it shifts from being deluded by dualism to being purified, free from all obscurations:[89]

> The transformation of the basis is defined as follows: a) liberation from all obscurations, upon reversal of the *all-obscured* (*sgrib pa thams cad pa*), i.e. the dependent nature which is included within the entirely deluded part; and b) control over all things, because of transforming into the dependent nature included in the purified part.[90]

Transformation, then, refers to the way in which conscious experience or the dependent nature pivots from being a deluded bit of saṃsāra into a purified manifestation of nirvāṇa. In other words, bodhisattvas don't get rid of saṃsāra because they transform it into nirvāṇa.

Of particular importance for our purposes, the transformation of consciousness from saṃsāra to nirvāṇa is what explains the sense in which bodhisattvas do not get rid of saṃsāra. *This*, it turns out, is what it means to say that nirvāṇa is not other than saṃsāra. Saṃsāra is nirvāṇa in the sense that saṃsāra *becomes* nirvāṇa, as Asanga concludes:

> When one understands the equality of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa, at that point, therefore, saṃsāra becomes nirvāṇa. Therefore, saṃsāra is not abandoned nor not abandoned. Therefore, nirvāṇa is not attained or not attained.[91]

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[89] Sponberg, "Dynamic Liberation in Yogācāra Buddhism," 50.

[90] MSG(L), 84: *gnas gyur pa'i mtshan nyid ni sgrib pa thams cad pa kun nas nyon mongs pa'i char gtogs pa'i gzhan gyi dbang gi ngo bo nyid rnam par log na sgrib pa thams cad las rnam par grol zhing chos thams cad la dbang sgyur ba nye bar gnas pa rnam par byang ba'i char gtogs pa gzhan gyi dbang gi ngo bo nyid du gyur pa'i phyir ro.* Note that Lamotte reads the underlined "*pa*" as "*pa'i*" whereas Dege does not (MSG(D), F.37b).

[91] MSG(L), 83: *'khor ba dang ni mya ngan 'das / / mtshungs par shes pa nam skye ba / / de tshe de phyir de la ni / / 'khor nyid mya ngan 'das par 'gyur / / de yi phyir na 'khor ba ni / / gtong ba ma yin mi gtong min / / de phyir mya ngan 'das pa yang / / thob pa ma yin mi thob min.*

Takasaki, who has analyzed the canonical origins of this verse, suggests they are quotations from some other, yet to be identified source (Takasaki, "*Saṁsāra Eva Nirvāṇam*," 338). Perhaps in support of this view, it is worth noting that these two verse immediately follow two verses from the MSA (20.53 & 54).

The takeaway here is that we don't get nirvāṇa by tossing out saṃsāra any more than we will find gold by tossing out the precious lump of earth. True—the things of this life, my body, my home, and my child are conditioned and in the nature of suffering, but the way to transcend that suffering is not by leaving these behind. As metaphysically subtle as all of this is, perhaps Asanga's insight is more down-to-earth—the transformation we call "awakening" is accomplishing by shaping, molding, smelting what we have.

Āśrayaparāvṛtti is what anchors non-abiding nirvāṇa (*apratiṣṭhita-nirvāṇa*), according to Yogācāra.[92] When consciousness falsely appears as dualistic, that is saṃsāra; when it correctly appears, without duality, that is nirvāṇa. The key to non-abiding is to eliminate kleśa without getting rid of saṃsāra. For Asanga, saṃsāra is not rejected or eliminated because it is transformed:

> How is the difference in elimination (*spong ba ≈ prahāṇa*) to be viewed? The elimination of bodhisattvas is non-abiding nirvāṇa (*apratiṣṭhita-nirvāṇa*), which is defined as the transformation of the basis (*gnas gyur ≈ āśrayaparāvṛtti*) wherein one remains without getting rid of saṃsāra even though one has gotten rid of *kleśa*.[93] Here *saṃsāra* refers to the deluded part (*cha*) of the other-powered (*gzhan dbang ≈ paratantra*) nature. *Nirvāṇa* refers to the purified parts of that. The *basis* (*gnas ≈ āśraya*) is the other-powered nature which includes both parts. *Other Transformation* (*gzhan gyur ≈ āśrayaparāvṛtti*)[94] refers to the turn away from the deluded part toward the purified part when the antidote of the other-powered nature is produced.[95]

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[92] MSG(L), 39.

[93] See Sponberg for an alternative translation of the above from the Chinese (Sponberg, "Dynamic Liberation in Yogācāra Buddhism," 50).

[94] Although *gzhan gyur* would seem to better reflect *parā* as opposed to *pari,* there is no one to one correspondence between *gzhan gyur-parāvṛtti* on the one hand, *gnas gyur-parivṛtti* on the other (Davidson, "Buddhist Systems of Transformation: *Āśraya-Parivṛtti/-Parāvṛtti* among the Yogācāra," 153). So it, for instance, that the Tibetan translator of the MSG, Yeshe De, uses both *gzhan gyur* and *gnas gyur* to translate *parāvṛtti* in his translation of Sthiramati's *Triṃśikāvijñaptibhāṣya*, a text for which the Sanskrit is extant (TrBh(Skt), 140;TrBh(Tib), 141).

[95] MS, 81: *spong ba'i khyad par ji ltar blta zhe na / byang chub sems dpa' rnams kyi spong ba ni mi gnas pa'i mya ngan las 'das pa ni gang yin pa'o / / de'i mtshan nyid ni / gang nyon mongs pa yongs su btang ba dang bcas pas 'khor ba yongs su mi gtong ba'i gnas te gnas gyur pa'o/ /de la 'khor ba ni gzhan gyi dbang gi ngo bo nyid de kun nas nyon mongs pa'i char gtogs pa'o / / mya ngan las 'das pa ni de nyid rnam par byang ba'i char gtogs pa'o / / gnas ni de nyid gnyi ga'i char gtogs pa ste / gzhan gyi dbang gi ngo bo nyid do / / gzhan gyur pa ni gang gzhan gyi dbang gi ngo bo nyid de nyid kyi gnyen po skyes nas gang kun nas nyon mongs pa'i cha ldog cing rnam par byang ba'i char gyur* pa'o.

Consciousness, what Asanga here is calling “other-powered” (*paratantra*), can go either way—it can either be misconstrued dualistically, as an object, or properly understood as non-dual.[96] Since the transcendence of suffering is about transforming the aggregates, not amputating them, rather than disappearing, bodhisattvas and buddhas attain power and autonomy (*dbang ’byor pa*).[97]

Let us take stock of what this gives us. We ended the previous section perplexed: if ignorance was constitutive of saṃsāra, getting rid of that cognitive error leaves us with no saṃsāra and, indeed, no appearances—hardly the non-located freedom the Mahāyāna path would have us expect. Now we have an altogether different way of understanding how saṃsāra is in fact nothing but nirvāṇa. Not understanding the way things are, our consciousness seems like a dualistic subjectivity in a world of objects. Upon seeing through that duality, we can experience our consciousness for what it is—primordially and fundamentally non-dual.

Nor does the idea that nirvāṇa is not separate from saṃsāra stop here. As the *inseparability of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa* (*’khor ’das dbyer med*) becomes the contemplative focus of the Sakya Lamdre (*lam ‘bras*), zenith of the Buddha dharma, quintessence of all teachings, and master narrative for Sakya scholars like Drakpa Gyaltsan and Gorampa, we find yet more meanings, one tumbling off the next, with ever more Tantric valences.[98] The key point about transformation that

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Although, in line 2, Lamotte parenthetical supplies “*kun nas*” based on Xuanzang, I omit that here (81). Likewise, immediately following this, where Lamotte omits the instrumental (*yongs su btang ba dang bcas pa*), underlined above, I supply it based on the Dege edition (MSG(D), F.36b).

[96] Elsewhere in the MSG, Asanga makes this same point in the language of the three natures, again in the context of explaining the non-duality of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa, where he states that the *paratantra* contains both the *parikalpita* and *pariniṣpanna* (MSG(L), 39. Furthermore, since he defines these latter two natures, respectively, as consciousness falsely appearing as an object and not appearing as an object, there is good reason for interpreting the shift from saṃsāra to nirvāṇa in terms of duality and non-duality (MSG(L), 25 ff.).

[97] MSG(L), 82.

[98] E.g. Gorampa’s *sgron me*, 99. Shakya Chokden’s relation to the Tantric material, in contrast, was more complex—his Tantric influences were more diverse and less confined by the Sakya Lamdre commentarial tradition (Komarovski, *Visions of Unity The Golden Pandita Shakya Chokden’s New Interpretation of Yogacara and Madhyamaka*, 30).

remained consistent across "Sūtra and Tantra" (*mdo sngags*), however, is that when we remove the conditions for dreaming, our experience does not stop. We just wake up.

Wake up to what, though? Pure consciousness, devoid of content? The world as we know it? Or something else entirely?[99] The Sakya scholars who we have been following paint a picture of this transformation in which awakened experience opens out on to a world, entirely inconceivable, but not entirely lacking content.[100] They speak of an awakened experience in which all things appear as "infinite purity" (*dag pa rab 'byams*), with all of the concrete specificity of the Buddha's major and minor marks, but altogether beyond ordinary perception.[101] One is reminded here of Blake's haunting vision of perception purified: "If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, Infinite."[102] That this infinite purity transcends our perceptions, concepts, and frameworks is obvious; that this purity is nothing other than this body and this mind must not be forgotten.

3. Conclusion

What Mahāyāna texts are offering is, *prima facie*, impossible—regardless of whether you think transcendence is found through eliminating the aggregates or seeing their emptiness, either you

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[99] See Kuan for an analysis of a parallel ambiguity in Pali accounts of nirvāṇa (Kuan, "Conscious of Everything or Consciousness Without Objects? A Paradox of Nirvana").

[100] As it turns out, *āśrayaparāvṛtti* also became central to the soteriology of Drakpa Gyaltsan, Shakya Chokden, and Gorampa. For Drakpa Gyaltsan and Gorampa in particular, the Lamdre (*lam 'bras*), a Tantric system of practice coming out of the Hevajra Tantra, offers the final word on what constitutes awakening. As different as these parallel accounts of *āśrayaparāvṛtti* are, what stays the same is the intuition that what we are getting rid of (x) is transformed into what we are trying to attain (y) through the realization that x is nothing other than z, the thing that goes on to become y.

For Gorampa, however, this adaptation of *āśrayaparāvṛtti* is not confined to the Lamdre. In keeping with his tendency to employ typically Yogācāra concepts in his Madhyamaka interpretations, even when interpreting Candrakīrti, he understands the arising of the Buddha's wisdom as coming about through *āśrayaparāvṛtti* (*dbu ma spyi don*, 276).

[101] *dbu ma spyi don*, 269 & 270.

[102] Blake, "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," 39.

have aggregates or you don't, either you are experiencing the aggregates or you're seeing their emptiness. Even though experiencing the Two truths simultaneously, something Buddhas are often said to be capable of, is a vast and complex issue, going there will not address our present concern. Even if the Two truths are perceived in a single experience, the bottom line is that if you have conditioned aggregates, you are in saṃsāra and you suffer but, if you don't, the bodhisattva's career would seem to end abruptly in nirvāṇa's peace. There would seem to be no third option. This is where we left things at the end of the last chapter.

Mahāyāna soteriology remains intelligible only because attaining awakening means that saṃsāra, your conditioned aggregates most of all, do not stay the same. Finally internalizing the insight that there are no aggregates, no suffering, and no conditioning, you don't then come out of this experience to find things as they were. Saṃsāra is transformed. To be clear, the idea is not that the aggregates stay the same but our perspective on them shifts but, rather, that the Buddha's perspective sees how things are and, from that awakened perspective, the aggregates themselves are fundamentally different.

My overarching objective in this chapter was to demonstrate this point—that while the Buddha's final act is to come back to the world, it is not a return to the way things are. To see why and how, at the end of the path, we don't "wake up" to the world as it was, we needed to carefully unpack the Mahāyāna claim that nirvāṇa is not other than saṃsāra. Rethinking this doctrinal claim was critical, firstly, because of the immanent interpretations of the inseparability of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa that are often explicitly the rationale behind this idea that we eventually come back to the familiar world. Secondly, ironically, this very idea that saṃsāra and nirvāṇa are not different is in fact what showed us that, whatever else you might say, upon awakening there is no return to your 'old life.'

Part of the reason it is so difficult to get a grip on this idea that saṃsāra, our own conditioned aggregates, are transformed through the path is that we have an ingrained tendency to imagine that the bodhisattva or buddha returns to the familiar world as we know it. Since we inevitably see the world and read texts through the prism of our own familiar concepts, the temptation to imagine the awakened perspective from within our own perspective is almost irresistible. If you've ever had the chance to hear a seven-year-old talk about how she imagines her adult life, inevitably she imagines doing adult things but with all the desires of a child—being an adult she will have her own house but, of course, her first act as homeowner will be to fill the house with Legos and stuffed animals. It is difficult enough for her to imagine not wanting what she presently wants. What is even more difficult for her to understand is that she will become someone who doesn't see things the way she does, who will be cognizant of the practical and fiscal difficulties of filling a house with Legos, for instance. Apparently, this is difficult for us too, insofar as we inevitably think that when bodhisattvas and buddhas 'return to the world,' there are experiencing it the way we do.

What we have seen is that, while this claim that nirvāṇa is not other than saṃsāra more often than not is meant as an apophatic non-affirmation of anything, it reaches its apotheosis in the idea of transformation, that saṃsāra transforms into nirvāṇa. If awakening is constituted by the transformation of saṃsāra into nirvāṇa then, whatever it is you think Buddhas do, you can be sure they aren't simply inhabiting their old haunts and familiar conceptual structures. There *is* a return, above all else the Buddha must come back for us, but, from an awakened perspective looking back on us, nothing seems the same. One is reminded here of Wallace Steven's *Tea at the Palaz of Hoon*:

> I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw
> Or heard or felt came not but from myself;

And there I found myself more truly and more strange.[103]

Although Buddhist philosophers debated just how strange or, to put it differently, just how much of our old perspective remains, what I have tried to show is that, at a minimum, the familiar frameworks that constitute our perspectives are left behind.

[103] Stevens, "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon," 69.

VI. Conclusion

1. Where We've Come

We began with the question of what it means to have eliminated suffering, the Third Noble Truth, and the goal of the Buddhist path: Is the elimination of suffering an internal psychological achievement or is it constituted by leaving our body and lives behind? Reflecting on the tension between these immanent and transcendent goals was as important for premodern Buddhist philosophers as it is for us today, albeit for very different reasons. What I have tried to show, however, is that both options in this spiritual dilemma assume that there is suffering to be eliminated and that the problem is solved by doing something to get rid of suffering. Against this view, we found that Mādhyamika philosophers such as Candrakīrti, picking up the refrain of many Mahāyāna Sūtras, argued that setting out to solve the problem of suffering is wrongheaded—just as you can't cure the present King of France's baldness, trying to attain nirvāṇa by getting rid of suffering makes no sense. The point, rather, is to realize that there was no suffering in the first place.

What it means to be free of suffering, concerns about immanence and transcendence included, comes down to this underlying question of whether eliminating suffering is about letting go of what I have been calling "frameworks." As I laid out in the Introduction, supposing you are the sort of Buddhist philosopher who thinks that this problem is, indeed, analogous to a nonexistent king's baldness, there are two positions you might take: According to the first position, since the fact that we are suffering is a proposition held in place by some form of conceptual framework, freedom from suffering requires suspending any framework that asserts the existence of suffering.

Although he doesn't put it in these words, Candrakīrti's point is that the Abhidharma's analysis of suffering and its cessation through the lens of dependent-arising is precisely the sort of framework that prevents us from attaining nirvāṇa. Since, according to this Abhidharma framework, we *do* suffer, we cannot "solve" the problem of suffering by realizing there is no such thing to be eliminated.

A stronger claim is that we must get rid of all frameworks. So, not just any framework that holds suffering in place, but even frameworks that deny suffering are to be discarded. The way Mādhyamikas talk about it, not only do we let go of the idea that there is suffering, we must also let go of the antithesis, that there is no suffering. While Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti never spell this out explicitly, for the Sakya scholars who've accompanied us along the way, transcending all frameworks is what distinguishes the bodhisattva's path to becoming a Buddha from the Śrāvaka's elimination of suffering.[1] Or, in other words, even though to be free of suffering you only need to let go of the framework according to which suffering exists, to become a Buddha you need to let go of all frameworks.

There is admittedly something bizarre and counterintuitive about solving the problem of suffering by denying that there is any. Even when we parameterize this claim through the Madhyamaka Two Truths, according to which the denial of suffering takes place at an ultimate level of analysis, it's still neither intuitive nor an obvious starting point for a philosophical account of the Four Noble Truths. If we weren't already so familiar with these Mahāyāna soteriological renovations, we might even be incredulous: "you started with the Buddha's advice to know suffering and the origins of suffering, and this is where you chose to go?"

[1] *lta ba'i shan 'byed*, 75.

In Chapter Two, we saw how the logic of the Four Noble Truths themselves, however, push us towards this otherwise odd non-solution to the problem of suffering. To see just how so, we used Vatsagotra's question of what happens to the Tathāgata after death. After introducing the classical view that the reason this question was left unanswered is that it presupposes a Self that might or might not survive postmortem, we saw that Vatsagotra's question points to the deeper difficulty of how to understand the elimination of suffering. Is there something which is nirvāṇa or is it simply an absence, specifically, the absence of kleśa and suffering?

What we saw is that these options put us in a bind. When we opted for the positive metaphysical way of thinking about the elimination of suffering, according to which there is some *thing* which is nirvāṇa, we were faced with the difficulty of how it could be affected by what we do. Since the Buddhist intuition motivating these soteriological inquiries is that freedom from suffering must be unconditioned, we found ourselves with something of a paradox. We also saw, however, that rejecting this positive metaphysics in favor of the idea that nirvāṇa is just the absence of any future suffering fared no better. The upshot of this chapter was that, since starting from the idea that we suffer leaves us with an elimination of suffering that is profoundly difficult to square with the idea that freedom is unconditioned, the internal logic of Buddhist soteriological thinking pushes us to reconsider our starting point.

Reconsidering the premise that there is suffering to be eliminated was our task in Chapter Three. Focusing for the most part on Candrakīrti, we saw how the ontological claim that in "reality" there are no aggregates and no suffering is precisely the freedom from suffering we call "nirvāṇa." What this meant for our concerns is that suffering is not eliminated because, in the emptiness that we are now calling "nirvāṇa," there is no suffering nor for that matter, anything else. The upshot of this was that the problem of eliminating suffering turned out, at least in

Candrakīrti's analysis, to be akin to the present king of France's baldness—it is "solved" by realizing that there is no suffering. The reason the Buddha refused to answer Vatsagotra's question, it turns out, is because there is no suffering, no aggregates, not anything that might or might not continue postmortem.

With this rethinking of the soteriological question in hand, in Chapter Four we started to finally flesh out what it means to be free from suffering. To make sense of this, we asked what it is that we are supposed to be free from, as well as the more difficult question of what "freedom from" or transcendence might mean. By reflecting on the canonical distinction between *sopadhi-* and *nirupadhi-śeṣa nirvāṇa* we were able to see that even though the former was indeed an internal psychological achievement, the normative goal of Buddhist philosophers continued to be the latter, a freedom from conditioning in which this life and this body are left behind.

What it means to be free from conditioning, however, we found to be far more controversial. Here again we came up against the same question we were wrestling with in Chapter Two and Three—Is this "freedom from" a matter of separating ourselves from our aggregates, or is the point here that there are no aggregates and, therefore, that freedom is gained simply by seeing that there is no suffering? Returning to Candrakīrti's texts, we found that being free from conditioned aggregates was constituted by seeing the emptiness of the aggregates. In a Mahāyāna soteriological context in which freedom from suffering must still allow embodied engagement with others, the transcendence of conditioning needed to be understood in epistemic terms, as a shift in perspective, rather than as a "separation" (*visaṃyoga*) from our aggregates in which compassionate engagement is no longer possible. With one fell swoop, the Mādhyamika was able to point to how conditioning can be transcended without any postmortem disappearing act.

The trouble, however, was that as soon as we made the transcendence of suffering a matter of seeing the empty aggregates, we found ourselves in what I suggested was the most perplexing dimension of Mahāyāna soteriology: the tension between the ultimate perspective in which no one has ever suffered anywhere and the conventional fact that we all suffer all the time. That is to say, from a "correct" perspective, there is no suffering, and we are already free from conditioning and yet, there is still a sense in which there is saṃsāra, there is still suffering, and we are still conditioned. *Prima facie*, Candrakīrti's solution seemed to have put us in a bind: if we take this ultimate perspective as our only perspective, this reworking of nirvāṇa would fare no better than the Abhidharma's elimination of the aggregates, since on neither version would awakening allow for compassionate engagement with others. Then again, if the idea is that we come out of, or at least augment, this ultimate perspective with the conventional fact that there is suffering, this nirvāṇa qua emptiness would seem to leave us back where we started, trapped by conditioning.

In Chapter Five, we saw how this perplexing problem comes from our deeply entrenched assumption that the Buddha's return to the world is a return to the same old familiar world of saṃsāra. There is a great deal at stake here insofar as it is only with this assumption in place that attempts to remake Buddhist soteriology in our contemporary image make sense, a point I will expand on in the next section. Over the course of the last chapter we were able to take apart this immanent interpretation by carefully reflecting on the Mahāyāna adage that nirvāṇa is not different from saṃsāra. Not only did we find that seeing this claim as an immanent affirmation of where we are is exegetically out of place and philosophically misguided, we also found that the inseparability of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa reveals how arriving at the other shore of awakening involves an epistemic shift so total that, looking back, this shore of saṃsāra is changed beyond recognition.

2. The Trouble with Naturalism

The takeaway from these Mahāyāna soteriological reflections is that, since getting rid of suffering is about seeing that there is no suffering, at a minimum, attaining nirvāṇa makes no sense in a framework in which we suffer. Over the course of the last chapter, however, we also found that "non-located nirvāṇa" (*apratiṣṭhita-nirvāṇa*), the Mahāyāna goal *par excellence*, requires that we stop thinking about awakening as if it leaves our perspective intact, as if we somehow come back to those aspects of our cognition that were right all along. Buddhist philosophers talked about this as a complete transcendence of conceptuality, leaving no room for any frameworks, let alone the frameworks that undergird some starting point to which we could return.

What I have said thus far—that attaining nirvāṇa is unintelligible within a framework in which we are suffering—poses an insurmountable problem for the attempt to naturalize soteriological concepts. If the only way to be free of suffering is to undermine any framework in which the proposition that we are suffering is true, nirvāṇa cannot be understood in naturalistic terms since the existence of suffering must be assumed within such a framework. If this point isn't already clear by now, going back to our earlier analogy, the problem is akin to the difficulty someone who thinks France is still a monarchy will face as she tries to adequately address the present King of France's baldness. Resolving this very simple problem by pointing out the nonexistence of said monarch suddenly becomes impossible. The proper "solution" eludes her because her framework assumes the existence of the present King of France. The same thing, I have argued, applies to naturalizing nirvāṇa—at least on the terms that many Mahāyāna texts demand.

Although I already gestured to this point in the Introduction, now we are able to see why the two most obvious objections don't hold water. The first, what we might call the "Two Truths Objection," goes like this: It would be stupid to think Mādhyamikas are just denying suffering

across the board. Since attending to the context and form of Madhyamaka arguments makes it clear that their denial of suffering is at an ultimate level of analysis, they are not denying the conventional fact that we all suffer. As such, the purported problem for a naturalized soteriology turns out to be nothing more than the claim that, on the one hand, ultimately there is no suffering and, on the other hand, suffering exists conventionally in a way that is best described by a naturalistic framework. Since Candrakīrti and almost every other Mādhyamika would agree that we suffer conventionally, the naturalist is no worse off than anyone else.

To get to the real issue here, let us set aside the philosophical question of whether this way of thinking about the Two Truths overly insulates the conventional. Although it is worth noting how Mādhyamikas like Gorampa and Shākya Chokden were, in fact, intent on demonstrating that the ultimate level of analysis in which there is no suffering *does* undermine our conventional belief that there is suffering, that is another debate for another time.[2]

More to the point, we are now in a position to see clearly that soteriological concepts only make sense at this ultimate level of analysis.[3] Narrowing our discussion to just Candrakīrti, across his oeuvre, over and beyond anything else, he argues that emptiness is nirvāṇa, and thus that freedom from suffering only makes sense at this ultimate level of analysis. So, in other words, Candrakīrti's response to the "Two Truth Objection" is to acknowledge that we do suffer conventionally but to insist that, properly understood, our concept of nirvāṇa must always point to the emptiness of suffering.

[2] Thakchoe, *The Two Truths Debate: Tsongkhapa and Gorampa on the Middle Way*, 42.

[3] To be clear, when we say that concepts like "emptiness" or "nirvāṇa" only make sense at an ultimate level of analysis, we are saying that they point us towards the non-perception of anything, not that the concept withstands such an analysis.

Why this is a stumbling block for Buddhist naturalism is more obvious when we stop to remember just what a naturalized nirvāṇa is supposed to be. To take the most obvious and influential version, "nirvāṇa," or its near approximation, refers to a psychological state that, at least in principle, can be operationalized within an empirical framework.[4] So construed, from a Mādhyamika perspective, a naturalized nirvāṇa appears self-defeating: "nirvāṇa" has become a psychological state or concept, but at the level of analysis in which such states and concepts operate, there is no freedom from suffering; and at the level of analysis in which there is freedom from suffering, there are no psychological states or concepts either.

The second objection to my claim that such Mahāyāna perspectives pose a deep problem for naturalizing Buddhism is perhaps better understood as a concession: "Yes," naturalists might acknowledge, "it may well be true that soteriological concepts are to be understood at an ultimate level of analysis in which naturalized psychological concepts have no purchase. However," they continue, "our task is to naturalize Buddhist beliefs, karma and rebirth most of all." In other words, according to this objection, since Buddhist naturalists started the conversation announcing that they had a plan to purge Buddhism of its supernatural elements, to go on about how emptiness seems to resist naturalization is to miss the point.

What distinguishes naturalism from common sense and a healthy respect for science, however, is its claim that, in any particular domain, *only* the methods or ontology of science are legitimate. Just upgrading particular beliefs piecemeal according to the best available empirical evidence isn't naturalism. What sets naturalism apart and gives it substance is its totalizing claim that everything within a particular domain must be understood scientifically. Hence, a naturalist cannot set out to

[4] Davis and Vago, "Can Enlightenment Be Traced to Specific Neural Correlates, Cognition, or Behavior? No, and (a Qualified) Yes," 3.

set out to naturalize psychology while conceding that dream analysis, for example, offers many legitimate insights that cannot themselves be studied empirically. As I pointed out in the Introduction, Buddhist naturalism first and foremost must be understood as the attempt to understand the normative soteriological structure of the Four Noble in purely empirical terms. To concede that the Truth of Cessation does not, in fact, make sense in such terms is to concede defeat.

Now, what we began to see in the previous chapter, however, is that naturalism is also predicated on the even more precarious assumption that, after you arrive at the other shore, you return to reaffirm that there was something essentially right about the perspective with which you began. According to this way of thinking about it, an awakened mind thinks like us and believes like us in at least some important respects. As I pointed out, this premise, that it is only certain pernicious beliefs and negative emotions that distinguish our perspective from an awakened one, is necessary for Buddhist naturalism to make sense.

At the heart of Buddhist views of awakening is the claim that it is constituted by seeing the way things are; hence, in the final analysis, reality is what a Buddha sees. The upshot of this is that our perspective—or at least some part of it—can only be the final word on how things are *if* this outlook is matched by awakened experience. If, on the other, it turned out that an awakened perspective is completely at odds with our present perspective cognitively and epistemically, how we presently see the world is, at best, a provisional stepping-stone. Since our present perspective is itself dismantled through the process of awakening, it cannot, however, be the touchstone against which Buddhist beliefs are to be measured. This is all the more obvious when it comes to soteriological concepts—if awakening is, at a minimum, the transcendence of our frameworks, how could we hope to use our present framework to capture what constitutes it?

The same goes for our naturalist view of things. It only makes sense to say that naturalism ought to be the blueprint for interpreting Buddhist doctrine if this is borne out in awakened experience. If this were not the case, if what a Buddha perceives is at odds with our naturalist framework, then naturalism can hardly be the final word on reality, nor would it make sense to remake the path in our naturalistic image, since that very image is part of what is being dismantled. What we would be left with is the idea that empirical evidence offers a useful description of how things seem to us—but, as we have seen, that much is hardly controversial.

3. A Crossroads

Where does this leave us? Most Buddhist philosophers didn't believe what Candrakīrti said, and a great many of them have always been happy to dismiss Nāgārjuna and Asanga as well. It goes without saying that Buddhist naturalists also need not agree with them. Not only is fidelity to this Mahāyāna view not a requirement, if there are independent reasons for why naturalists should accept this antirealist approach, I haven't given a sufficient enough account of them. But this was never my intention. My point is not that Candrakīrti, Gorampa or any other Buddhist "got it right." What I have tried to show, rather, is that this is where the argument lies. While one could blindly go about naturalizing Buddhist soteriological concepts without arguing with Buddhist philosophers, I hope I have demonstrated that this would be a missed opportunity. What I have tried to show is that, assuming then that the attempt to naturalize Buddhism is going to involve arguing with Buddhist philosophers, the real issue naturalism needs to grapple with is whether attaining nirvāṇa is about letting go of frameworks.

The importance of this point extends well beyond any particular attempt to naturalize Buddhism. Due largely to naturalism's influence, we have profoundly misunderstood what the choices are for contemporary Buddhist thought and practice. It is intuitive for many of us that the

choice is between a massively reduced but empirically credible Buddhism on the one hand and "traditional" cosmologies of karma and rebirth on the other. When we set it up this way, the real question would seem to be just how epistemologically permissive we are going to be or, as a naturalist more tendentiously might put it, just how low our epistemic standards can go. What I hope will have become clear by now, however, is that thinking about the options in this way misses the point. Whether "Buddhism" is to be reduced to a small set of empirical concepts or is tied to traditional worldviews skips over the status of frameworks.

The real question for contemporary Buddhism or, in more personal terms, the real question for you and me, is about the place of frameworks. Is the Buddhist path about adopting one framework over another and then holding on to it to the bitter end? Or, as so many of the Buddhist philosophers we've met with in these pages have been trying to show us, is the path supposed to be leading us out of such frameworks? For those of us here on this shore, nirvāṇa is, above all else, one's refuge, that in which a Buddhist must place her hope and trust, come what may.[5] The existential question this leaves us with is whether to put our trust in this or that framework or, instead, to have faith in the freedom found when we let these frameworks fall.

[5] *rol mtsho, ka,* 269; *yum don rab gsal*, 89; *lam rim chen mo*, 142.

Abbreviations of Indian Texts

AK	*Abhidharmakośa* (Vasubandhu, 1975)
AKBh	*Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* (Vasubandhu, 1975)
AS	*Abhidharmasamuccaya* (Asanga, Dege Tengyur)
ASbh	*Abhidharmasamuccayabhāṣyam* (Jinaputra, Dege Tengyur)
AA	*Abhisamayālaṃkāra* (Sanskrit edition, Obermiller, 1992)
AA(Tib)	*Abhisamayālaṃkāra* (Tibetan edition, Obermiller, 1992)
AAA	*Abhisamayālaṃkārālokā Prajñāpāramitāvyākhyā* (Haribhadra, 1973)
AAkk	*Abhisamayālaṃkāravṛtti kīrtikalā* (Ratnakīrti, Dege Tengyur)
AAsa	*Abhisamayālaṃkāra Sphuṭārtha* (Haribhadra, 2000)
AAv	*Āryapañcaviṃśatisāhasrikāprajñāpāramitopadeśaśāstrābhisamayālaṃ kāravṛtti* (Vimuktisena, Dege Tengyur)
BCA	*Bodhicaryāvatāra* (Śāntideva, 1960)
BK *i*	*Bhāvanākrama I* (Kamalaśīla, 1997)
BP	*Buddhapālita-Mūlamadhyamakavṛtti* (Buddhapālita, 1984)
BV	*Brahmaviśeṣacintiparipṛcchā Sūtra* (Dege Kangyur)
Dbh	*Daśabhūmika Sūtra* (Vaidya, 1967)
DN	*Dīgha Nikāya* (Freer, 1884-1898)
HS	*Prajñāpāramitāhṛdayasutram* (Vaidya, 1961)
LV	*Lalitavistara* (Hokazono, 1994-2019)
MA	*Madhyamakāvatāra* (Candrakīrti, 1970 & 2015[1])
MABh(P)	*Madhyamakāvatārabhāṣya* (Candrakīrti, 1970)
MABh(X)	*Madhyamakāvatārabhāṣya* (Candrakīrti, 2022)
MAS	*Madhyamakārthasaṃgraha* (Bhāviveka, Dege Tengyur)
MAṬ	*Madhyamakāvatāraṭīkā* (Jayānanda, Dege Tengyur)
MH	*Madhyamakahṛdaya* (Bhāviveka, 2001)

[1] References to MA chapter 6 are for Candrakīrti, 2015; references for all other chapters are for Candrakīrti, 1970.

MMK	*Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (Nāgārjuna, 1913)
MN	*Majjhima Nikāya* (Freer, 1884-1898)
MP(D)	*Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* (Dege Kangyur)
MP(W)	*Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* (Waldschmidt, 1950)
MSA	*Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra* (Asanga, 1907-1911)
MSABh	*Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkārabhāṣya* (Vasubandhu, 1907-1911)
MSG(D)	*Mahāyānasaṃgraha* (Asanga, Dege Tengyur)
MSG(L)	*Mahāyānasaṃgraha* (Asanga, 1938)
MSGUb	*Mahāyānasaṃgrahopanibandhana* (Asvabhāva, Dege Tengyur)
PsP	*Prasannapadā* (Candrakīrti, 1913)
PsP(D)	*Prasannapadā* (Candrakīrti, Dege Tengyur)
PsP(M)	*Prasannapadā* (Candrakīrti, 2015)
PsP(R)	*Prasannapadā* (Candrakīrti, 1978)
PrPr	*Prajñāpradīpa* (Bhāviveka, Dege Tengyur)
PrPrṬ	*Prajñāpradīpaṭikā* (Avalokitavrata, Dege Tengyur)
PV	*Pramāṇavārttika* (Dharmakīrti, 1970^2)
PVS	*Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā* (Kimura, 1990)
RGV	*Ratnagotravibhāga* (Johnston, 1950)
RGV(D)	*Ratnagotravibhāga* (Dege Tengyur)
RV	*Ratnāvalī* (Nāgārjuna, 1982)
RVṬ	*Ratnāvalīṭīkā* (Ajitamitra, 1991)
SA	*Sphutārthābhidharmakośavyākhyā* (Yaśomitra, 1970)
SūBh	*Sūtrālaṃkāravṛttibhāṣya* (Sthiramati, Dege Tengyur)
SN	*Samyutta Nikāya* (Freer, 1884-1898)
ŚrBh	*Śrāvakabhūmi* (Asanga, 1998)
ŚSV	*Śūnyatāsaptativṛtti* (Candrakīrti, Dege Tengyur)
Tr	*Triṃśikā* (Vasubandhu, 2007)
TrBh(Skt)	*Triṃśikāvijñaptibhāṣya* (Sanskrit ed., Sthiramati, 2007)
TrBh(Tib)	*Triṃśikāvijñaptibhāṣya* (Tibetan ed., Sthiramati, 2007)
Vism	*Visuddhimagga* (Buddhaghosa, 1950)
YṢ	*Yuktiṣaṣṭikā* (Nāgārjuna, 2014)
YṢV	*Yuktiṣaṣṭikāvṛtti* (Candrakīrti, 1991)

Abbreviations of Tibetan Texts

ar	*mngon rtogs rgyan gyi 'grel ba rnam 'byed* (Ar Jangchub Yeshe, 2006)
bang mdzod	*theg pa chen po dbu ma rnam par nges pa'i bang mdzod* (Shākya Chokden, 2011)
dbu ma spyi don	*rgyal ba thams cad kyi dgongs pa zab mo dbu ma'i de kho na nyid spyi'i ngag gis ston pa nges don rab gsal* (Gorampa, 2011)
mchims mdzod	*chos mngon pa mdzod kyi tshig le'ur byas pa'i 'grel pa mngon pa'i rgyan* (Chim Jampalyang, 2009)
gzhung don rab gsal	*dam pa'i chos mngon pa mdzod kyi 'grel pa gzhung don rab tu gsal ba* (Gorampa, 2011)
sgron me	*gsung ngag lam 'bras don bsdus ma'i rnam bshad zab don gnas kyi sgron me* (Gorampa, 2011)
dgongs pa rab gsal	*dbu ma la 'jug pa'i rgya cher bshad pa dgongs pa rab tu gsal ba* (Tsongkhapa, 2008)
rgyan 'grel	*shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa'i man ngag gi bstan bcos mngon par rtogs pa'i rgyan 'grel pa dang bcas pa'i snga phyi'i 'brel rnam par btsal zhing dgnos bstan gyi dka ba'i gnas la legs par bshad pa'i dpung tshogs rnam par bkod pa bzhad tshul rba rlabs kyi phreng ba* (Shākya Chokden, 2010)
ljong shing	*rgyud kyi mngon par rtogs pa rin po che'i ljong shing* (Drakpa Gyaltsan, 2007)
'jug ngogs	*dbu ma rtsa ba'i rnam bshad skal bzang gi 'jug ngogs* (Shākya Chokden, 2010)
Dka 'gnas	*mngon mdzod dka' gnas rnam bshad* (Shākya Chokden, 2006)
lam rim chen mo	*byang chub lam rim che ba* (Tsongkhapa, 2002)
glu sgrub dgongs rgyan	*glu sgrub dgongs rgyan* (Gendun Chophal, 2009)
ngan sel	*dbu ma la 'jug pa'i dkyus kyi sa bcad pa dang gzhung so so'i dka' gnas la dpyad pa lta ba ngan sel* (Gorampa, 2011)
rnam bshad snying po rgyan	*shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa'i man ngag gi bstan bcos mngon par rtogs pa'i rgyan 'grel pa dang bcas pa'i rnam bshad snying po rgyan* (Gyaltshab, 2002)

phar phyin spyi don	*shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa'i man ngag gi bstan bcos mngon par rtogs pa'i rgyan 'grel pa dang bcas pa'i rnam bshad snying po rgyan gyi don legs par bshad pa yum don gsal ba'i sgron me* (Sonam Drakpa, 2006)
phar phyin mtha' dpyod	*rnam bshad snying po rgyan gyi don rigs lam bzhin du gsal bar 'chad pa'i yum don yang gsal sgron me* (Sonam Drakpa, 2005)
rigs pa'i rgya mtsho	*dbu ma rtsa ba'i tshig le'ur byas pa she rab ces bya'i rnam bshad rigs pa'i rgya mtsho* (Tsongkhapa, 2006)
rol mtsho	*mngon rtogs rgyan 'grel lung rigs rol mtsho* (Shākya Chokden, 2010)
gser phreng	*shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa'i man ngag gi bstan bcos mngon par rtogs pa'i rgyan 'grel pa dang bcas pa'i rgya cher bshad pa legs bshad gser gyi phreng ba* (Tsongkhapa, 2009)
gsung rab dgongs gsal	*sdom pa gsum gyi rab tu dbye ba'i rnam bshad rgyal ba'i gsung rab kyi dgongs pa gsal ba* (Gorampa, 2013)
gter gyi kha 'byed	*sher phyin mngon rtogs rgyan gyi gzhun snga phyi'i 'brel dang dka' gnas la dpyad pa sbas don zab mo'i gter gyi kha 'byed* (Gorampa, 2013)
thub pa dgongs gsal	*thup pa'i dgons pa rab tu gsal ba* (Sakya Pandita, 2006)
tshig don rab gsal	*shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa'i man ngag gi bstan bcos mngon par rtogs pa'i rgyan ces bya ba'i 'grel ba'i rnam bzhad tshig don rab tu gsal ba* (Rongton Sheja Kunrig, 2010)
lta ba'i shan 'byed	*lta ba' shan 'byed theg mchog gnad gyi zla zer* (Gorampa, 2009)
bstod pa rnam bshad	*chos dbyings bstod pa bstan bcos rnam bshad* (Shākya Chokden, 2006)
yum don rab gsal	*sher phyin mngon rtogs rgyan 'grel pa dang bcas pa'i dka' ba'i gnas rnam par bshad pa yum don rab gsal* (Gorampa, 2013)
zab don gsal ba'i sgron me	*dbu ma spyi don zab don gsal ba'i sgron me* (Sonam Drakpa, 2008)

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