

## Notes from the void

Written by Roy Sutherwood, from IKN Newsletter: Volume 1, Number 5, 2001.

### Why a philosophical approach?

On Saturday May 13, Roy prefaced a discussion of the 'self-empty' and 'other-empty' views in Tibetan Buddhism and its significance for Kalacakra with some words about the purpose, motivation and value of the philosophical approach within the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist traditions. Some of those attending asked for these to be reproduced. They are as follows:

The notion of a distinction between appearance and reality is as old as the ability of human beings to reason. It is fundamental to Buddhist thought and practice.

For example, someone known and well loved dies. We are shocked by reality. We implicitly expected that our friend who up to that point had always lived and breathed would always continue to do so.

All Buddhist traditions are essentially in agreement that to know what is ultimately true or real is to be enlightened and free from the suffering of samsara.

Buddhist philosophical schools have developed different conceptions of what constitutes ultimate reality, and have as a result developed diverse philosophical interpretations of what constitutes ultimate reality as well as different practical approaches to freedom from suffering, which are each understood as the most appropriate means for knowing reality.

Buddhist scriptures do not necessarily appear to convey a consistent, unified philosophical vision.

The Buddha is said to have taught in different ways on different occasions. The sutras are said to belong to two different vehicles, espousing different ideals of enlightenment with a different ethical emphasis and different formulations of the nature of ultimate truth. There are said to be three turnings of the Wheel of the Dharma. The Tantra, which developed at roughly the same time as the Mahayana, teaches special methods for making Buddhist philosophy a lived experience and elaborates upon the theories developed by critical philosophy.

Lack of agreement or consistency gives rise to the need for interpretation of the truth of any teaching. What is it trying to convey? What were the intentions of the teacher? What are the implications for practice? There is a need to follow the spirit rather than the letter of a teaching, or rather, perhaps, to know when something should be taken literally and when it requires interpretation. Does it need to be seen in context and guided by a body of knowledge, particular experiences or a conceptual framework of regulative ideals thought to yield a definitive meaning? Clifford Geertz has noted that "Any chronic failure of one's explanatory apparatus...leads to deep disquiet." (*'Religion as a Cultural System'* in *'Reader in Comparative Religion'*, ed. by Lessa and Vogt (New York: Harper and Row, 1972, p.172).

In *"The Two Truths"*, (pp13 &14), Guy Newland writes: "In Buddhism, ethical norms are supported by doctrines of karma and rebirth shared in large measure by Hinduism. However, when Buddha combined this ethical bedrock with a metaphysic of momentary impermanence (anitya) and selflessness (nairatmya), root contradiction was an incipient danger. If in reality there is no self, who is the agent of good and evil? How is the person who commits an action related to the person who experiences its moral effect? Where do karmic potentialities reside between the time of an action and its effect? What is it that moves from one rebirth to the next? The persistent problem of Buddhist philosophy has been to find the middle way: an ontology with enough substance to support the conventional presentations of

the ethical system without betraying Buddha's original vision of the ultimate truth of no-self. Too much 'substance', and one falls to the extreme of eternalism; negate too much and one falls into the extreme of nihilism."

This indeed potentially appears to be a fundamental contradiction. From a contradiction, anything follows.

Earlier in the same work Guy Newland says of contradiction : "The unwillingness to suffer contradiction is among the main forces driving the making and the re-making of religion at all levels." (Guy Newland, *'The Two Truths'*; Snow Lion Publications 1992; p.9).

Philosophical discourse and dialogue is an activity, characteristically argumentative, in the best sense of the term, directed at the determination of what logical relations do and do not obtain in an attempt to resolve contradiction and create or discover a coherent world. The language of explanation and explication, descriptions, models and paradigms have to shift and change to diffuse the tensions of both fundamental and emerging contradictions.

This is as true of religious doctrines in the process of their evolution as of doctrines of any other sort.

The resolution of fundamental, circumstantial or internal contradictions is one driver for human engagement in the activity of philosophical dialogue and discourse in any sphere.

In religion there are also others. John Whitney Pettit has well identified and articulated some of these: "As the handmaiden of religion, philosophy might not function as a transforming process but as the rigid armour of dogma. However, the neglect of critical philosophy in a soteriological context tends to result in the degeneration of religious traditions into partisan insularities. This was a major concern for Buddhist philosophers. Philosophy imbued with the spirit of moksa is more likely to draw people together than drive them apart." (*'Mipham's Beacon of Certainty - Illuminating the View of Dzogchen, the Great Perfection'*, p104)

The first is something to be guarded against if a vital and living tradition is not to degenerate into mindless literalism and dogma, the second is essential if a narrow and destructive sectarianism is to be avoided.

Tension between the mediating pair of illusory appearance and ultimate truth give rise to sets of philosophical difficulties that are of concern to all who propound doctrines differentiating appearance and reality. We can choose not to use the mediating concepts of illusory appearance and ultimate truth to tackle the fundamental contradictions. We could just try and explain away our naïve expectations and accept that mundane realities are in fact all that there is.

John Pettit's words echo again strongly here "If philosophy is understood as a process of historical development without a specifiable goal, or as a deconstructing metadiscourse that parasitizes the naïve speculation of earlier ages, the classical Indian understanding of philosophy's purpose might seem impoverished." (p104). Mipham identifies philosophical dogmatism as a symptom of "inverted hermeneutics" - relying on the teacher, rather than the teaching, the words instead of the meaning, and so on.

On the upside, Pettit articulates well the case for the philosophical approach: "For its Indian and Tibetan exponents, Buddhist critical philosophy has an exalted purpose. It is an effective tool for gaining confidence in realities that transcend the contingencies of culture and history. Unless the experience of freedom in personal realization is integrated with philosophical discourse, however, it is difficult if not impossible to share that realisation with others. It is by revealing the possibility of freedom from the

culture of compulsive adherence to ordinary identities and differences, that philosophy has secured its vital role in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism." (p105)

### **Why is the 'self-empty' or 'other-empty' debate important for us?**

Apparently contradictory descriptions of emptiness found in scriptures and commentaries identified with different phases of the tradition was one of the major sources of tension in the interpretation of late Indian Buddhism as it was received in Tibet.

The notion of an enlightened eternal essence or Buddha -nature present within every living being, was in marked contrast to the earlier Buddhist emphasis on the lack of any enduring essence in sentient beings. The interpretation and reconciliation of these two themes in the doctrinal materials the Tibetans had inherited from India and elsewhere were of crucial importance.

As Cyrus Stearns has argued, (*'The Buddha from Dolpo - A study of the life and thought of the Tibetan master Dolpopa Sherab Gyaltsen'*, SUNY, 1999), in fourteenth century Tibet these issues seem to have reached a point of "critical mass". Many of the prominent masters of this period who produced the most influential works on these subjects were both intimately involved in the practice and teaching of the Kalacakra Tantra, and either personally knew each other or had many of the same teachers and disciples. Dolpopa argued that his teachings and his "new" Dharma language were new but only in the sense that they were not known in Tibet. This was, he claimed, because they had come from the realm of Shambhala in the north, where they had been widespread from an early date.

He explicitly linked his ideas to the Kalacakra Tantra and the Vimalaprabha. Dolpopa clearly felt that the earlier interpreters of the Kalacakra literature had not fully comprehended its profound meaning. He even ordered a new translation of the Kalacakra Tantra and the Vimalaprabha for the purpose of making the 'definitive' meaning more accessible to Tibetan scholars and practitioners. He was attempting to remove what he saw as the results of accumulated mistaken presuppositions that had informed the earlier translations in Tibet, and thus provided the basis for many erroneous opinions concerning the true meaning of the Kalacakra Tantra. The Kalacakra Tantra and the Vimalaprabha were the ultimate scriptural basis for Dolpopa's innovative and controversial teachings.

Dolpopa saw no difference between speaking of the absolute as totally unestablished and itself empty and saying that there was no absolute. Is a relative possible without an absolute? The incidental possible without the primordial? The entities of existence possible without a true nature?

If the relative, incidental entities of existence are existent without an absolute, then wouldn't those entities themselves constitute an omnipresent reality or true nature? There would from such a perspective be nothing else.

This is for him an unacceptable conclusion. Everything is not the relative for there is of course an absolute truth as well.

If it is impossible for there to be no absolute, does that not contradict the notion of an absolute which is totally unestablished? Everything cannot be empty of self-nature, for then there would be no difference between the absolute and the relative. Hence Dolpopa's insistence that the absolute and the relative must be empty in different ways.

Therefore, for Dolpopa, the only solution is the acceptance of the absolute as a true, eternal and veridically established reality, empty merely of extraneous relative phenomena. The essencelessness, which others take to be emptiness, is limited for it does not apply to the ultimate - only conventional phenomena are essenceless and external objects do not exist, even at a conventional level.

For Dolpopa a thoroughgoing denial of inherent existence which applies to the absolute misses the middle way by denying too much. For him, it eliminates the possibility of the absolute and falls into the extreme of nihilism. For his subsequent critics, he is the one who negates too much in denying the existence of objects even at a conventional level and by so doing falls to both the extremes of eternalism and nihilism by reifying the ultimate and denying existence to the conventional.

Those who cannot accept Dolpopa's view see it as the deprecation of the status of conventional phenomena in the face of an absolutised emptiness.

Beyond Dolpopa, under the label of emptiness of other one can find a number of conflicting views

### **What about our practice, going forward?**

Sakya Chokden, among others, has described these kind of views as focusing on the experiential side of the non-dual gnosis of a Buddha and characterises it as a form of Yogacara. He saw it not as the final definitive view. For this we must look to Nargarjuna, but this approach is seen as perhaps being a more appropriate way to account for the experiential side of the realisation of emptiness. The Gelukpa exponents of a radically self-empty view, on the other hand, tend to place more insistence on reasoning as a guide and propaedeutic to religious experience.

Interestingly, Jeffrey Hopkins has pointed out that there have been many great philosophers and yogis in all four major orders of Tibetan Buddhism. One approach, rather different from Tsong Khapa's, "interprets the Consequence School such that there is no universally valid consciousness certifying the existence of phenomena, no such valid establishment. In this interpretation, all that appears to our minds as inherently existent is mistaken and, therefore, non-existent except for an ignorant consciousness. The non-existent appears vividly. Why is this not nihilism? Even though, beyond merely allowing for what appears to an ignorant consciousness, they deny any validity in what appears to us now, they teach that underlying these appearances - or in another way, replacing them once we pass beyond them - is the one great sphere of reality. Teachings such as this prevent a practitioner from falling into nihilism until direct cognition of the great sphere of reality is manifested. Even if only through a lama's telling you about it, you know that there is not nothing" (*'Emptiness Yoga: The Tibetan Middle Way'* Snow Lion 1987, p95)

The most interesting questions for future group discussions in this area would be around what it is that we actually do, what techniques we actually use and what we actually experience when, in our practice, meditation on emptiness is called for.