Withdrawal Is Not Enough

There is a very large gap between, on the one hand, analytical reasonings such as those described in the previous chapter and, on the other hand, the bodhisattva's direct, nondualistic experience of emptiness in nirvana. It is clear that Ha-shang is not the only one who sees this as an unbridgeable gap; he is simply a character deployed to epitomize an extreme form of that opinion. It seems that long after Ha-shang, even in Tsong-kha-pa's day and down to the present, there have been Tibetans teaching that because enlightenment is nondualistic and nonconceptual, our practice should from the very outset emulate that condition to the maximum degree. In their perspective, any practice that involves analytically searching for a philosophical understanding of reality will only bring about further entanglements in discursive and dualistic thought. Thus, we should instead stabilize our minds in a state completely free from any thought. They argue that setting the mind in a condition where it apprehends no object at all brings it into alignment with the ultimate reality because nothing exists in the face of emptiness.

Tsong-kha-pa is intent upon refuting this approach in any of its variations. Has this meditator who is setting his mind without any thought first understood the idea that this objectless condition will harmonize his mind with ultimate reality? If so, Tsong-kha-pa says, then he has in fact studied and adopted a philosophical view—the nonexistence of everything—and then meditated in accordance with that. So it is not really the case that he is doing no analysis. Rather, he has instead made an error in his analysis and negated too much.

That no object is found "in the face of emptiness" is true in the sense that when one searches for anything with ultimate analysis, it is not found. However, this does not at all mean that the mind of ultimate wisdom has no object of realization. It realizes emptiness, the utter absence of intrinsic nature. As discussed above,

emptiness exists. It is fully compatible with dependent arising and all conventional truths.

In response, these teachers simply insist that all conceptual thoughts—about emptiness or anything else—are fraught with dualistic reification and on that account bind us in cyclic existence. They do not distinguish between correct thoughts and incorrect thoughts because all thinking is dualistic and brings about further reification. Liberation is attained by setting the mind in a state of nonconceptual suspension.

In addition to showing that this contradicts scriptures such as those cited above, Tsong-kha-pa reiterates an argument Kamalashila used against Ha-shang: This would make it impossible to practice generosity, compassion, nonviolence, and many other aspects of the Mahayana path. The cultivation of these virtues, critical to the bodhisattva path as described in many scriptures, requires that one consider other beings and their needs. As noted above in Chapter Three, perfect enlightenment is attained through a synergy of practices of wisdom and practices of virtue for developing merit. If one holds that wisdom cancels out any thoughtful engagement with other living beings, then one cannot develop the virtues of an enlightened buddha.

One version of the "no thought" teaching compares the discursive, conceptual mind as it goes out after its object to throwing a ball. After a thought reaches out to its object, we could then use analysis to chase after the mind's dualistic elaborations and try to run them down, like a dog chasing after a ball. But it would be better to stop the mind before it goes out after its object—like a dog jumping up to snatch a ball before it can be thrown. On this view, "those who train in scriptures and reasonings that determine the view" are devotees of an inferior practice that does not get at ultimate reality because it does not attack the problem right at its source—the mind's endless elaboration of dualistic concepts.

Of course, Tsong-kha-pa argues that the problem is not conceptual thought *per se*, but the gravely mistaken reification of objects

as intrinsically existent. The influence of this *particular* misconception is present in both ordinary perception and ordinary thought, but the error itself is one that can and must be refuted by careful reasoning based on definitive scriptures.

Tsong-kha-pa acknowledges that those who hold their minds in nonconceptual states do not, at that time, think of things as intrinsically existent. On the other hand, they also do not realize that intrinsic existence is false. Therefore, they are not practicing a path that will liberate them. When they emerge from meditation, they will soon fall back under the spell of the *still-unrefuted* misconception of intrinsic existence. Referring to the intrinsically existent self of persons and the intrinsically existent self of other phenomena, Tsong-kha-pa advises,

> You must distinguish between (1) *not thinking about true existence* or the existence of the two selves and (2) *knowing the lack of true existence* or the nonexistence of the two selves. Remember this critical point.

Not thinking about a problem is not enough. We must know the truth.

If simply withdrawing the mind from thought were a path to liberation, then people would become buddhas just by fainting or falling deeply asleep. Teachers could use a quick upper-cut to the jaw in order to induce a supposed "objectless" awareness in students. But suspending all thinking is just like burying your head in the sand or closing your eyes in the face of danger.

Rather than living in denial, we have to confront our mistaken way of thinking, challenging it directly by using analysis to become absolutely certain that it is wrong. The buddhas are called "conquerors" because they have faced the enemy of ignorance and defeated it utterly with the weapon of analytical wisdom. Withdrawing from all thought is not only cowardly but ultimately futile and self-defeating.

Serenity on the Path of Wisdom

The initial realization of emptiness is a profound certainty arrived at through the analytical, introspective meditative process we have described. While it is a very powerful experience, it is a conceptual and therefore dualistic understanding. Nirvana is attained only through a direct, nonconceptual, nondualistic experience of emptiness. How can one get from one to the other?

In order to begin to refine a conceptual and thus dualistic understanding of emptiness into a liberating nondualistic experience, the bodhisattva uses the power of *serenity*, a powerful concentration developed through stabilizing meditation. Serenity is a state in which the mind and body have become pliant as the mind focuses firmly and one-pointedly upon its object. One-pointed absorption on a single object of concentration weakens the ordinary dualistic sense of subject and object. Pliancy means that your mind and body are serviceable, responsive. There is no resistance to practice. You take delight in focusing your mind on a virtuous object, while your body feels light and buoyant (Volume 3: 81–84).

To develop serenity, you use mindfulness (keeping your attention on an object) and vigilance (watching carefully to see when attention begins to slip) to focus your mind and to maintain attention continuously and clearly, without distraction. Eventually, the mind stabilizes, resting naturally where you have set it. When this practice develops to the point that your body and mind are pliant and blissful, then you have attained serenity. The Tibetan term for serenity (*zhi gnas*) suggests a *quieting* (*zhi*) of mental movement toward distracting external objects and *abiding* (*gnas*) on an internal object of meditation.

Bodhisattvas definitely must learn to focus their minds in this way. This is what creates the mental power that allows them *to begin* to progress from discursive analysis of reality to direct, nondualistic realization. Having attained serenity with regard to any object, and having separately realized emptiness through analysis, the bodhisattva then learns to make emptiness itself, the

conclusion established in analysis, the object of serene attention. Serenity focused on emptiness is itself still a conceptual mind. This is because emptiness, having been realized through inferential analysis, presents itself to the bodhisattva's mind as a conceptual image. It is this image/idea of emptiness that is then taken as the meditative focal point for serenity.

Preparing for Insight

It is possible that one may analyze and even realize emptiness first, and then set out to attain serenity; it is also possible that one may attain serenity without yet having realized emptiness. In either case, one must *not* do extensive analytical meditation while working to achieve serenity for the first time. This is because the discursive movement of the mind from object to object as it analyzes is quite different from the nondiscursive stability of serene concentration on a single object. Tsong-kha-pa says,

> It is impossible to achieve serenity if, prior to achieving insight, you repeatedly alternate between analysis and post-analytic stabilization . . .

However, once serenity has been attained, one must return to the practice of analytical meditation, working again and again through reasonings demonstrating that all things are empty of intrinsic nature.

Tsong-kha-pa emphasizes that you *cannot* develop true insight simply by realizing emptiness once in analysis and thereafter practicing only serenity meditations in which you stabilize your mind on that conclusion. Rather, you have to *sustain* your understanding of emptiness by repeatedly returning to analysis, using multiple lines of reasoning, and working through them again and again. In this way, you become deeply accustomed to the certain knowledge that things are empty. Tsong-kha-pa says, "Ascertainment of the view becomes strong, long-lasting, clear, and steady to

the extent one becomes accustomed to what one has determined." Insight is impossible if emptiness is something that you analyzed one time and then only remember having realized. Tsong-kha-pa says,

> When you have determined [the view of emptiness], you *repeatedly* analyze it using discriminating wisdom. Stabilizing meditation alone, without sustaining the view, will not create insight. Therefore, when you meditate after having attained serenity, you must sustain the view through continued analysis.

It is especially important to Tsong-kha-pa to emphasize that discerning analysis is a critical and continuing part of a practitioner's meditation practice. It is not something that one does just at the beginning, until one can attain serenity focused upon emptiness. He shows that this point is supported by the treatises of Kamalashila, Chandrakirti, Bhavaviveka, and Shantideva. For example, Bhavaviveka explains meditation on emptiness as an inquiry into how things exist that is built upon the foundation of a previously attained mental stability: "*After* your mind is set in equipoise, this is how wisdom investigates . . ." This does not at all mean that there is no analysis of emptiness before one attains serenity—clearly, there is. However, it emphasizes the importance of *continuing* analysis even after serenity has been achieved. The order of the six perfections, with meditative stabilization preceding wisdom, also reinforces this key point.

On the other hand, it will not work to do *only* analytical meditation after attaining serenity. Just as the force of your certainty about emptiness will weaken if it is not sustained by repeated analysis, the strength of your serenity will degrade if it is not refreshed with the repeated practice of stabilizing meditation. Therefore, you must alternate between the practice of stabilizing meditation, reinforcing your serenity, and analytical meditation, building up

your wisdom. This is the path leading to sublime insight. Tsong-kha-pa advises us,

> You alternate (1) developing certainty, profound certainty, that there is not even a particle of true existence in any thing or nonthing whatsoever, and (2) stabilizing your mind on the conclusion thereby reached.

One has to strike a balance between serenity and analysis, two kinds of practice that are superficially discordant. Analysis is required to see into the nature of things, but too much analysis weakens the mind's stability. Serene stability is required to give the mind focused power, but one cannot afford to become so absorbed in one's object that one forgets to use analysis to renew the certainty of one's conclusions about the nature of reality. Kamalashila explains that when too much analysis weakens one's serenity, the mind is like a flame placed in the wind. It wavers, becoming unfocused, so that it does not see reality clearly. On the other hand, if one practices too much serenity focused on emptiness, but does not refresh one's certainty about emptiness with more analysis, then one "will not see reality very clearly, like a person who is asleep." That is, the stability of the mind is strong, but the clarity of the object, emptiness, is weakening due to not being refreshed with more analysis.

Insight

Eventually, after long practice, the bodhisattva's analytical wisdom itself spontaneously *induces* the blissful and pliant condition of serenity. The term "insight" (*lhag mthong*) refers to an analytical wisdom that—in the same session of meditation and without interruption or effort—brings about serenity focused upon the object one is analyzing. Literally, insight (*lhag mthong*) means a *superior* or *special* (*lhag pa*) kind of *seeing* (*mthong*). This practice in

which profound analytical insight naturally gives rise to serenity is called *the union of serenity and insight*.

The union of serenity and insight is a fusion of analytical power and sublime one-pointed focus. It is a mind that powerfully and analytically discerns its object without in any way fluctuating from pliant and one-pointed absorption. Tsong-kha-pa says that one should *not* think of it as "a small fish moving beneath still water without disturbing it." This striking image suggests that some Tibetans explained the union of serenity and insight as a composite mental state in which just a small portion of the mind engaged in penetrating analysis of ultimate reality without disturbing a vast ocean of mental peace. In contrast, Tsong-kha-pa sees it as a fully empowered and activated analytical mind, penetrating its object with serene and laserlike focus.

Analytical wisdom is called *insight* only at the point where it is able to induce serenity. Prior to that point, deep analytical wisdom is considered "an approximation of insight." Therefore, it is not the case that one first attains true insight and then later, after much more practice, unites it with serenity. Tsong-kha-pa says, "From the time that you first attain insight, you will have that union." Analytical wisdom is true insight when, within that very session of meditation, analysis induces and becomes fused with serenity.

While our concern here is analysis of the *ultimate* nature of phenomena and serenity focused upon that, it is worth noting that serenity and insight each may be focused on either the ultimate nature of all phenomena (emptiness) or on some conventional object of meditation. The term "insight" can sometimes refer to analytical wisdom discerning a conventional object, such as impermanence, as long as that wisdom is able to induce serene concentration upon that object.

The attainment of insight into emptiness is a crucial step forward on the path. This locks in one's cognition of ultimate reality by linking it to the supernormal power of meditative serenity. Nonetheless, even at this point, insight is a conceptual knowledge of emptiness. It is dualistic in the sense that the mind apprehends

and focuses upon an image or idea of emptiness. At this point, the bodhisattva knows emptiness through the medium of that mental representation. Can a conceptual understanding of something, however profound, set the stage for a nondualistic perception of that same object?

One of Tsong-kha-pa's key messages in the *Great Treatise* is that the answer to this question is, "Yes, absolutely, if you know what you are doing. Moreover, it is *only* by starting out with conceptual analysis that you have *any* chance of coming to know the ultimate reality in a direct, nondualistic manner." In support of this, Tsong-kha-pa quotes the Buddha, who—in the *Kashyapa Chapter Sutra*—teaches,

> Kashyapa, it is like this. For example, two trees are dragged against each other by wind and from that a fire starts, burning the two trees. In the same way, Kashyapa, if you have correct analytical discrimination, the power of a noble being's wisdom will emerge. With its emergence, correct analytical discrimination will itself be burned up.

In other words, powerful and correct analysis of emptiness, while conceptual and dualistic, gives rise to the ultimate mind—nonconceptual, direct perception of emptiness. Such direct realization is utterly nondualistic. In the fire of this wisdom, all of the dualism of the original analysis is burned away.

Some may object that this is a contradiction because there is a lack of harmony between the cause—dualistic analysis—and the effect—nondual wisdom. Tsong-kha-pa points out that causes are often quite different from their effects. Fire is unlike smoke. A grey seed is unlike a green sprout. In this case, there is a great harmony between cause and effect in the sense that both are forms of wisdom knowing the emptiness of intrinsic nature.

To reinforce his point, Tsong-kha-pa returns to cite a passage from the *King of Concentrations Sutra*. In a sense, the entirety of the

Great Treatise's insight section can be seen as an elaboration of this striking bit of scripture:[10]

> If you analytically discern the lack of self in phenomena
> And if you cultivate that very analysis in meditation,
> This will cause the result, attainment of nirvana;
> There is no peace through any other means.

A Complete Practice

In this book we have explained in a modest way some of what Tsong-kha-pa teaches in the insight section of the *Great Treatise*. Considering just these things gives one a good start at understanding Tsong-kha-pa's ideas about meditation on emptiness, but it distorts the total message of Tsong-kha-pa's teaching. An absolutely crucial point for Tsong-kha-pa—a point that underlies the entire conception and design of the *Great Treatise*—is that one should not rush to what one thinks of as "higher" practices, neglecting basic trainings that are the foundation of the path. As Tsong-kha-pa puts it,

> Some say to expend your energy only to stabilize your mind and to understand the view, ignoring all earlier topics, but this makes it very difficult to get the vital points. Therefore, you must develop certainty about the whole course of the path.

Tsong-kha-pa advises that everyone must proceed from the foundational practices to more advanced training. Also, as you train in new and higher practices, you must constantly "go back to balance your mind" by practicing earlier meditations again. Long after you have had success with basic practices, you should return to them so as to renew, sustain, and reinforce, for example, your faith in your spiritual teacher, your understanding of impermanence, karma, and mortality, your disenchantment with cyclic existence,

your commitment to any vows you have taken, and your aspiration to enlightenment for the sake of helping all living beings.

Tsong-kha-pa concludes the *Great Treatise* by insisting that one must enter the Vajrayana path—which is to say, Buddhist tantric practice. However, this is to be done "after you have trained in the paths common to both sutra and mantra." In other words, all of the key elements of general Mahayana practice, as presented in the *Great Treatise* as a whole, are foundations without which one is not suited for the distinctive practices of tantra. Tsong-kha-pa teaches us that by entering and practicing Buddhist tantra on the basis of a proper foundation, we will make our lives worthwhile. We will bring happiness to all, extending the benefit of the Buddha's teaching both within our own minds and within the lives of others.