

Chapter 3 The Two Truths (Verses 1 to 4ab)

Commentary

First, I would like to point out the broad sections of Shantideva's root text that I will be using as the basis for my exposition of the ninth chapter, "Wisdom." According to the commentaries by Khenpo Künpal and Minyak Künsö, the ninth chapter is divided into the following three segments:

1. The necessity of cultivating the wisdom of emptiness (verse 1)
2. A detailed explanation of how to cultivate this wisdom (verses 2-150)
3. A concise explanation of how to realise emptiness (verses 151-167) [Chapter 11]

The Necessity of Wisdom

We can begin with verse 1, where Shantideva states unequivocally the necessity of practicing wisdom:

1. All these branches of the Doctrine
The Powerful Lord (or Enlightened Sage) expounded for the sake of wisdom.
Therefore they must generate this wisdom
Who wish to have an end of suffering.

In brief, **all aspects of the teachings of the Buddha are intended to lead individuals to the state of full enlightenment. All the teachings finally converge on this point. Because of this, either directly or indirectly, all the teachings are related to the path of generating wisdom. This is why Shantideva here says that all the branches of the teachings are for gaining wisdom.**

According to the Middle Way philosophy of the Mahayana tradition, the realization of emptiness is indispensable even to attain liberation from cyclic existence. This point is stated repeatedly in Shantideva's text. When we speak of attaining freedom from suffering, it is crucial that our understanding of suffering is not limited to the suffering of painful sensations. Our understanding must also include the origins of suffering, such as the afflictive emotions and thoughts.

The Second Segment

The second segment (verses 2-150) is a detailed explanation of how to develop the realization of emptiness, and it has three sections.⁴ The first of these sections (verses 2-39) is divided into three subsections, each one concerned with specific aspects of the two truths. They are:

1. definitions of the two truths (verse 2) [Chapter 3]
2. the different kinds of individuals who establish the two truths (verses 3—4ab) [Chapter 3]
3. dealing with objections on how the two truths are posited (verses 4cd—39) [Chapters 4 & 5]

Definitions

First is the **definitions of the two truths**, which Shantideva presents in the second verse.

2. **Relative and absolute (ultimate),
These the two truths are declared to be.
The absolute (ultimate) is not within the reach of intellect,
For intellect is (said to be) grounded in the relative.**

As I mentioned above, **since there is this basic discrepancy between the way we perceive things and the way things really exist, there is an illusion-like quality to our perception of our own existence and of the world around us. In order to develop true insight into the ultimate nature of reality, it becomes important to understand the two truths, which refers to the twofold nature of reality.** We find the term *two truths* used also in non-Buddhist literature, such as the philosophical writings of many ancient Indian schools that also upheld notions of spiritual freedom. However, the doctrine of the two truths referred to by Shantideva is that described in the writings of the Indian Middle Way, or Madhyamaka, school, and in particular its sub-school known as the **Prasangika-Madhyamaka**.

Past Buddhist thinkers diverge in explaining the reason for the division into two truths. Some maintain that the basis of division is our conventional experience of the world. Others, such as Butön Rinpoche, take truth in its entirety as the basis of the division. They therefore see the two truths as two aspects of truth in general. A third group of scholars take knowable objects as the basis, which they then divide into two aspects, conventional truth and ultimate truth. This third approach is based on more authoritative Indian sources, such as Shantideva's *Compendium of Deeds (Shikshasamuchaya)*, in which the author explicitly cites knowable objects as the basis of the division between the two truths.

⁴ a. Verses 2 to 39. Discussed here in Chapters 3 to 5

i. Verse 2 [Chapter 3]

ii. Verses 3 to 4ab [Chapter 3]

iii. Verses 4cd to 39 [Chapters 4 & 5]

b. Verses 40 to 56. Discussed here in Chapters 6 to 7

c. Verses 57 to 150. Discussed here in Chapters 7 to 150

i. Verses 57 to 69 [Chapters 7 & 8]

ii. Verses 70 to 77 [Chapter 8]

iii. Verses 78 to 115 [Chapters 9 & 10]

iv. Verses 116 to 150 [Chapter 11]

In Minyak Künsö's commentary, the author states that the two truths are presented from the point of view of two different perspectives. From the perspective of our everyday experience, the reality of the world is conventional and relative. From the perspective of the way things ultimately exist, the reality of the world is emptiness, which is the ultimate, or absolute, truth. The two truths are understood then as two different perspectives on one and the same world.

In his *Supplement to the Middle Way (Madhyamakavatara)*, Chandrakirti states that all things and events have two natures, or aspects. The conventional, or relative, aspect is known from our phenomenal experience, and the ultimate nature of things is perceived from the point of view of the ultimate perspective. **So here too we find that the two truths are defined in terms of two different perspectives. One is from the perspective of our everyday experience, and the other is from the perspective of the true insight into the ultimate nature of reality.**

In this view, when we examine the nature of the reality of things and events (everyday objects such as tables, chairs, vases, and flowers) the degree of reality that we perceive at the level of our phenomenal experience relates to their relative truth. And so long as we remain content within this framework, we remain at the level of phenomenal experience and conventional validity. **The moment that we are not content with the validity of the conventional framework and seek to go beyond its confines, we are then searching for a deeper or truer essence or core identity. Yet what we find through the ensuing analysis is that things and events are actually unfindable. When engaged in this way, we are relating to the world, to things and events, at their ultimate level, their total emptiness. This is their emptiness of intrinsic existence, the absence of any identity and existence of things and events in their own right. At this point we find that the two truths are most clearly understood as two different perspectives on the things and events that make up the world.**

The commentary by Künpal reflects the viewpoint of the Nyingma school. One of the characteristics of its style of presentation can be seen clearly in Mipham's (1846-1912) commentary on Shantarakshita's *Ornament of the Middle Way (Madhyamakalamkara)*, where he distinguishes between the Prasāngika-Madhyamaka and Svatantrika-Madhyamaka schools on the basis of their understanding of the two truths. He states, however, that the two Middle Way schools equally maintain ultimate truth as being beyond the scope of intellect, and as such it is not considered to be an object of the intellect. According to Mipham, anything that is an object of the intellect must necessarily be relative and conventional.

Reality and Intellectual Understanding

Among Tibetan commentators there are **two different interpretations of the line, "The absolute is not within the reach of intellect."** One is to adopt an understanding of the absolute or ultimate truth from two different perspectives and to maintain that the actual ultimate truth lies beyond the scope of the intellect, the cognition of an ordinary being. That is Khenpo Künpal's interpretation. Another understanding of this crucial line comes from the writings of Tsongkhapa. In his view the ultimate truth is not an object of an intellect that is dualistic, whose object of cognition is the relative and conventional. **Instead, the ultimate truth is an object of a direct perception or experience that is totally free of dualistic elaborations and concepts. Therefore, according to Tsongkhapa also, the two truths are defined on the basis of two different perspectives.**

According to Tsongkhapa's understanding, we can read the 2nd verse of the 9th chapter as presenting the definitions of the two truths. **The reference to ultimate reality as not being within the reach of the intellect provides the definition of ultimate truth. We now read Shantideva as defining ultimate truth as that aspect of reality that is an object of a direct perception that is totally free of dualistic and conceptual elaborations. In contrast, the level of reality that lies within the scope of dualistic cognition is relative and conventional. In this way, we see Shantideva's passage as defining the two truths.**

When Mipham, in his exposition on Shantarakshita's *The Ornament of the Middle Way*, comments on the line, "The absolute is not within the reach of the intellect," he states that **although the mere negation of the intrinsic existence of phenomena is an object of the intellect, the emptiness that is the union of appearance and reality remains inaccessible to the intellect. It is important to note that when we speak of emptiness here, in the context of Bodhicharyavatara, we are doing so as it is understood within the sutra system.** However, when we speak of emptiness in the context of tantra, intellect or cognition has a different meaning. Tantra speaks of various levels and subtleties in the wisdom realising emptiness, and by extension of different levels of freedom from dualistic elaborations.

It is also important to recognise that **the scope of the two truths includes all things and events; the entire spectrum of reality is exhausted. In other words, there is no third possibility. There is nothing in the expanse of reality that is neither of the two truths.**

A Sequence for Understanding the Two Truths

As for the sequence in which the two truths are established, let us take the example of an everyday object such as a flower. First, the object, the flower, will appear to the mind, and then, on the basis of that appearance, we are able to examine its real nature. Shantideva's *Compendium of Deeds* is replete with

quotations from the sutras where the Buddha talks in great detail about the causal principle that exists in nature; how certain causes and conditions lead to certain effects and situations. First in these scriptures are extensive treatments of the conventional level of reality. **By examining how certain causes and conditions give rise to certain events, we can become more familiar with this world of multiplicity, which in turn has a direct effect on our experience. It is only on the basis of such solid grounding in understanding how things work in the phenomenal world of conventional reality that the analysis of the ultimate nature of reality can be brought into the picture. Once we have developed confidence in our understanding of the world of conventional truth, then we can enter productively into the examination of the ultimate truth.** We will then be able to fully recognise the discrepancy that exists between our perception of the world and the way things really are.

To fully appreciate the extent of the discrepancy between our perceptions and reality, it is essential that we successfully challenge the idea of concrete reality that we ordinarily project onto things and events. **This is our belief and experience that things and events exist in their own right and that they possess some kind of intrinsic identity and existence. It is through this process of negating this belief that we arrive at a deeper understanding of the ultimate truth, of emptiness.**

Sameness and Difference

There is then the question of whether the two truths are different or identical. On this issue there are also various viewpoints. For example, **Butön maintains that the two truths are different in terms of their natures**, whereas **Tsongkhapa**, citing Nagarjuna's *Commentary on the Awakening Mind (Bodhichittavivarana)* as his authority, **states that the two truths, though having conventionally distinct identities, are of the same nature. Like the distinction in Buddhist philosophy between the properties of being impermanent and of being a product, the distinction between the two truths pertains to two distinct perspectives on the same entity. Both truths relate to one and the same world. It is on the basis of adopting the two different perspectives that we are able to distinguish the natures and identities of the two truths.**

The identity of the two truths and their sharing the same nature is also referred to in the *Heart Sutra*. The well-known passage reads: **"Form is emptiness, emptiness is form; there is no emptiness apart from form, and there is no form apart from emptiness."** The sutra goes on to state that **all things and events possess this characteristic of emptiness. When we speak of the emptiness of form and other phenomena, we should not have the idea that emptiness is some kind of external quality that is projected upon objects. Rather we need to understand their emptiness as a function of their dependently arisen nature.**

When we analyse carefully, we find that both the physical existence and the identity of a form, for example, arise in dependence on other factors, such as that form's causes and conditions. **Beyond the interrelated factors that constitute its existence, we cannot speak of an autonomous, independent identity or existence of any given phenomenon.** This is not to say that the form does not exist at all, for clearly we can experience it, perceive it, and interact with it. At the level of multiplicity, our day-to-day experience, there is a form. But this form does not exist intrinsically; with its own discrete, independent reality. It exists only through relation with other factors, such as its causes, conditions, and various constituent parts. **This indicates that form is utterly devoid of an independent status.** Given that it is devoid of independent nature, it follows that it is dependent upon other factors. It is susceptible to transformation, and therefore, through interacting with other factors, it assumes different characteristics. **The form's absence of any independent nature (this characteristic of being empty of intrinsic existence) is its ultimate truth.** And **this is why the Buddha states in the Heart Sutra that "form is emptiness, emptiness is form."**

Two Kinds of Selflessness

When speaking of the ultimate truth, there are two major divisions: **the selflessness, or identitylessness, of persons and the selflessness or identitylessness of phenomena.** Chandrakirti states in the *Supplement to the Middle Way* that the division into selflessness of persons and selflessness of phenomena is made not on the basis of two totally different kinds of selflessness. Rather it is **done on the basis that in the world there are two principal categories of phenomena; subjects and objects. So "phenomena" refers here to the world, to things and events, and "person" to sentient beings. Based on this division of reality, we find the scriptures present two corresponding types of ultimate truth.**

This is the position of the Prasāngika-Mādhyamaka. Other schools of thought, such as the Svatantrika-Mādhyamaka and other Buddhist philosophical schools, maintain that there is a substantive difference between the selflessness of persons and the selflessness of phenomena. In the Prasāngika-Mādhyamaka, although there is an acceptance of various degrees of subtlety in understanding the selflessness of persons, in the final analysis, **both the selflessness of persons and the selflessness of phenomena are equally subtle.** We also find ultimate truth divided into lists of four, sixteen, and twenty emptinesses. These different taxonomies provide various ways of talking about emptiness. For example, emptiness may

be divided into internal emptiness, external emptiness, emptiness of both, and so on, often ending with the emptiness of emptiness. The point of identifying the emptiness of emptiness as a distinct category is that, since emptiness is presented as the ultimate truth, there is a danger of grasping onto emptiness as an absolute. The Buddha states therefore that even emptiness itself is empty of intrinsic existence.

True and False Conventions

Conventional, or relative, truth is divided into true and false conventions. According to the Prasāngika-Mādhyamikas,⁵ **however, since self-existence, or intrinsic existence, is denied even on the conventional level, the division of conventional truth into true and false can only be made from a certain perspective. In reality, there is no actual division within the conventional world.** But using such a perspective, we can speak about unreal and real perception, and we can characterise certain types of phenomenal experience as true and others as false.

Etymologies

Let us now look at the etymology of the two truths. **The term *conventional truth* implies a level of truth affirmed by the conventional subject or knower that rests on the mistaken belief in the true existence of things.** Because of this, the **Prasāngika-Mādhyamika does not accept the *truth* in the context of conventional truth as referring to truth in the real sense. So *conventional truth* here does not refer to some correspondence with the way things really are. Rather it refers to truth within a certain limited, relative framework. “Truth” in this conventional framework refers to a truth constructed by a particular viewpoint, and that viewpoint is our perception (or rather, our misperception) of the world, wherein we perceive all phenomena as if they possessed some kind of intrinsic reality. This deluded perception perceives people, things, and events as inherently and truly existing. From this point of view, the things in our conventional experience are seen to be valid, reliable, truthful, and enjoying some kind of discrete, independent, and objective existence. The conventional truth is also referred to as the *veiled truth* or *concealed truth*.**

This etymological explanation might appear to be providing some degree of validity to the perspective of our deluded states of mind. However, it is simply an etymological explanation. **In actual fact, things that appear to be true from this deluded perspective need not even constitute a relative truth.** Eg, even emptiness is grasped at as being valid from this deluded perspective, but that does not mean that emptiness can be accepted as a conventional or relative truth. Therefore, **the delusory point of view from which phenomena are seen as real cannot be accepted as valid.** We need therefore to find a perspective that has the ability to establish the validity of the conventional world. The perspective from which the reality of conventional truth is established cannot be that of a misperceiving or distorted state of mind.

Let us now turn to the meaning of truth in the context of *ultimate truth*. In his *Clear Words (Prasānnapada)*, Chandrakīrti states that **the term *ultimate* refers to both the object (emptiness) and to the direct experience of it.** So, from this viewpoint, **the “ultimate” in the context of ultimate truth refers both to the subjective experience and to the object, emptiness,** as well. To go further, **emptiness is both the ultimate and the truth being referred to when we speak of the ultimate truth.** For example, Chandrakīrti says that emptiness is the “meaning” or the “truth” (*don*), and it is also the “ultimate” (*dampa*). So here we see a convergence of the terms *ultimate* and *truth*.

Without understanding the nature of these two truths (the conventional and the ultimate) it is difficult to fully appreciate the distinction between appearance and reality, that is, the discrepancy we experience between our perception and the way things really are. Without a deep understanding of this fact, we won't be in a position to get at the root of our fundamental ignorance.

Emptiness and Compassion

Of course, there are various specific antidotes to the afflictions; such as meditation on love to counter hatred, meditation on the impurity of our body to counter desire, and so on. These various techniques can reduce different types of afflictive emotions and thoughts. However, as Dharmakīrti states in his *Valid Cognition*, **these methods only deal with the obvious manifestations of these afflictions. That is, they only indirectly influence our afflictions and the fundamental ignorance underlying them. They have no capacity to act as a direct counterforce to our fundamental misperception. It is only by generating true insight into the ultimate nature of reality that we will be able to get at the root of our confusion (our deluded way of perceiving) and the suffering it gives rise to. Without developing a full understanding of the two truths, we will not be able to gain deep insight into the true nature of reality. By developing a deep understanding of the two truths, we will be able to recognise the various distinctions that exist among our perceptions of the world, and also in our cognitive and emotional states. On the basis of this insight we can enhance the capacity and force of our positive mental states, such as compassion, love, tolerance, and so on, and at the same time reduce the force of our negative and afflictive states, such as anger, hatred, jealousy, and strong attachment.**

⁵ A proponent of the Madhyamaka school is a Madhyamika.

Since all these delusory and afflictive states are rooted in our belief in an intrinsic existence of the world, by generating true insight into emptiness we will be able to cut the root of all these delusory states. We will be in a position to fully develop and enhance the positive potentials that exist in our mind and reduce and eventually eliminate our negative and afflictive emotions and thoughts. This is one of the primary benefits of developing a profound understanding of the two truths.

Citing Nagarjuna's text, Khenpo Künpal states in his commentary that **the realization of emptiness and the arising of great compassion within one's heart are simultaneous.**⁶ He comments that as our understanding of emptiness deepens, so too our compassion toward other sentient beings will increase. It is difficult however to see the automatic connection between the realization of emptiness and the arising of nondiscriminatory compassion toward all sentient beings. However, **it does appear to be true that the deeper our realization of emptiness, the deeper our recognition of the possibility of ending our suffering.** And as we deepen our conviction that every sentient being has the potential to be free from suffering, then of course our compassion toward other sentient beings will increase. For then we know there is a way out, and our compassion for sentient beings (who are bound in this cyclic existence due to their ignorance of the way to be free from it) will naturally increase. So, as our realization of emptiness deepens, I feel that there is a corresponding and definite increase in the strength of our compassion toward others.

Therefore, if as an individual meditator you have a sense that your realization of emptiness is deepening yet there is no corresponding increase in your compassion toward others, then this is perhaps an indication that your understanding of emptiness is not really profound or genuine. As I often say, meditation on emptiness alone is not something to be admired. It is also crucial, in our day-to-day interaction with others, to be able to relate in an ethical and a compassionate way. So **if your understanding of emptiness does not contribute positively in any way toward this goal, there is no worth in it at all. What is there to be so admired about a realization of emptiness that does not lead to greater compassion?**

We should not have the notion that buddhahood is a state of total apathy, devoid of feeling, emotion, and empathy toward other sentient beings. For if that were the case, there would be nothing admirable about the state of buddhahood. **Meditation on emptiness is not some kind of escapism, refusing to deal with the diversity and complexity of the conventional and relative world. The aim is to be able to relate with the phenomenal world in a correct and meaningful way.**

This then concludes a brief exposition of the nature and role of the two truths.

Two Kinds of People

The root text next discusses the viewpoints of various kinds of individuals in regard to their understanding of the tenets and practice of Buddhism, such as the two truths. The text reads:

3. Two kinds of people are to be distinguished:

Meditative thinkers and ordinary folk;

The common views of ordinary people

Are superseded by the views of meditators.

4ab. And within the ranks of meditators,

The lower, in degrees of insight, are confuted by the higher.

Having made the case that the understanding of the two truths is crucial, Shantideva's root text goes on to explain that there are two principal types of people who will be dealing with the two truths, the meditator and the ordinary person. In Tibetan, the word for *ordinary folk* is *jiktenpa*, while the Tibetan term for meditator, in this context, is *naljorpa* and refers to people who possess a heightened perspective. *Jik* suggests something that is transient, something that is susceptible to cessation, and *ten* refers to a basis or foundation. So **the term *jiktenpa* implies a lack of permanence, and *jiktenpa* refers to a person or a transient being. The idea of *jik*, disintegration, negates the possibility of permanence, or eternity. By reflecting on this expression we can understand that there is no absolute, eternal, unitary self.**

Ordinary folk here also includes those who follow philosophical tenets that uphold some form of realist perspective on the question of the ultimate nature of reality. This includes the followers of all the non-Buddhist ancient Indian schools and the followers of some tenet systems among the Buddhist schools. The Vaibhashikas, for instance, believe in an atomistic world; an objective, independent world constituted by indivisible atoms. So in their tenets there is a belief in the substantial reality of things and events. The views of this school are negated by the Sautrantika school. They maintain that there are certain aspects of reality (such as mental constructs like the abstract composites) whose reality can be posited only from the perspective of thought and conceptualization. So they argue that we cannot give absolute objective status to things and events. The tenets of this school are again disputed by other Buddhist schools, and so on. This is what Shantideva means when he asserts that **the perspectives of one are confuted or invalidat-**

⁶ This is most probably a reference to the following stanza:

"So when the yogis

Have developed this emptiness [in their minds],

No doubt that the altruistic thoughts

Concerned with other's welfare will arise." Bodhichittavivarana, v. 73.

ed by the perspective of another. Even among the contemplatives, due to the different levels of their spiritual experience, the perspectives of those contemplatives at higher levels will supersede the perspectives of those at lower levels of realization.

Let us now look more closely at Shantideva's statement that the perspectives of ordinary people are invalidated and superseded by the perspective of the meditators. I believe that the manner in which one perspective supersedes and invalidates the other must be understood in terms of the level of the development of reasoning. Naturally, in a discourse among the Buddhist schools there could be occasions where Buddha's scriptural authority would be cited. However, **we must base our argument on reasoning, and the perspective of the contemplative will supersede and invalidate those of the ordinary person because of the contemplative's advanced reasoning.** For example, followers of certain tenets accepted by the Sautrantika and Vaibhashika Buddhist schools may cite scriptural sources for the authority of many of their positions. However, **if scriptural authority is the only basis on which we can adjudicate, this will create a proliferation of contradictory positions.**

Therefore, in Buddhism in general, and particularly in Mahayana Buddhism, it becomes important to distinguish, even **within the Buddha's own words, two categories of scriptures. On the one hand there are scriptures that can be accepted at their face value (that is literally, or without qualifications) and there are those that cannot be accepted literally and require further interpretation.** Once you accept this hermeneutical distinction, then you will be in a position to reject the literal truth of a scripture, especially when it contradicts your valid experience, even if it is the word of the Buddha himself. What this points to is **the critical importance of reasoning and understanding in the Buddhist spiritual approach. The Buddha himself stated in a sutra that people should not accept his words simply out of reverence for him. Rather they must test them against their critical understanding and personal experience,** just as a seasoned goldsmith would test the quality of the gold by subjecting it to a rigorous process of cutting, burning, and rubbing.

Shantideva's statement that even the views of those at lower stages of realization are superseded and invalidated by those of the higher ones can be understood as a fact based on our own personal experience. When we examine our own present understanding of such Buddhist topics as impermanence, absence of selfhood of things and events, and so on, and compare this with our past understanding, we find that as **our understanding and experience develops it becomes more profound.** Because of this, we can say that our present understanding supersedes the realization that we had in the past. So, as we gain new perspectives, new horizons emerge in our experience and understanding of the world.

Meditation

Meditate here on the truth of suffering and its origin. The root of suffering is karma, and karma is motivated, and driven, by delusory states such as our afflictions. Investigate: when afflictive emotions arise in us, what does it feel like? The very etymology of "klesha," which means afflictions, implies something that, as it arises in our minds, automatically creates a disturbance. So let us do this brief meditation, investigating how we feel when these troublesome emotions and thoughts, such as anger, hatred, jealousy, and so on, arise in us, and how much our experience of these emotions disturbs us. Concentrate on the destructive aspects of these emotions and thoughts.