



# Emptiness or *shunyata*

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Madhyamika philosophers developed a thorough philosophical understanding of 'emptiness' or 'shunyata' posited by them to be the ultimate nature of all things. They dismiss the idealist Yogachara approach and think it's nonsense to say that objects don't even exist conventionally and are merely mental fabrications. This goes against common sense, and Madhyamikas believe it's very important for any philosophy to take account of common sense, at least on the conventional level of truth. Otherwise, that philosophy risks being rejected by people out of hand.

There is a story that illustrates this point. A wealthy man has two expensive matching Chinese vases in his home. A friend accidentally knocks one of the vases over and breaks it. The owner is extremely upset because the vases were very precious to him; not only did they cost a lot of money but they had sentimental value as well. He is beside himself with rage. But his friend is a Yogacharin and is surprised at this reaction. "But your vase was not real in the first place", he says reassuringly, "there is no need for you to be upset." At these insensitive words the owner grows even more furious. In a flash of anger, he picks up the remaining vase and smashes it over his friend's head. "You say that my vases are not real?" he shouts. "What nonsense! I wonder what you think now. Maybe you think that your headache and the blood running down your face aren't real either, eh?" He had made his point.

Madhyamikas formulate things a little differently. They tread their own Middle Path between the extreme of believing that things truly exist and the other extreme of believing that things are completely non-existent. They apply three fundamental principles of the Dharma to everything in the universe, with no exception, in order to establish the emptiness of inherent existence (*shunyata*). These principles are:

- a) Impermanence and change
- b) Lack of unitary existence (nothing is a single, self-contained entity, everything is composed of many parts and particles)
- c) Lack of independent existence (things are defined in relation to each other)

They set about analysing one object after another in relation to these principles, asking themselves whether they apply to the object or not. If they do, then the object is shown to be 'empty'. According to this view, every single possible thing in the universe, both animate and inanimate, as well as the universe itself, is indeed empty of inherent existence. There are no exceptions at all. *Shunyata* is the ultimate nature of all things.

Emptiness can also be explained as interdependence, and this may be easier to understand. Interdependence points to the way that things depend on each other for their existence in a relation of mutual dependence. For example, the bare fact that I exist is dependent on my parents and on the right conditions for my conception and birth. The fact that I am still alive today fifty years later depends on



many, many factors: food and drink, heat and cold, the care received from other people, and so on. My state of mind right now also depends on a host of conditions: I feel relaxed because my neighbours are quiet tonight; I feel happy because my home is cosy and warm; I am joyful because I am with people I get on with, and so on. It makes no sense to imagine my existence as something independent of, or separate from, circumstance.

My existence *is* the coming together of all these factors.

In particular, Madhyamikas apply the principle of emptiness to the mind itself. My mind, and its thoughts, emotions and feelings, depend on factors such as stimuli. My states of mind change, they are not fixed, immutable entities. Thoughts, for example, arise, stay and dissolve like clouds in the sky. They should not be taken too seriously because they are empty of inherent existence. And likewise, the fundamental ground of mind from which thoughts and emotions arise is also empty in nature. There is nothing at all we can hang on to as fixed and 'real': neither the world, nor our body, nor our mind.

This logic means that, in ultimate truth, we cannot distinguish between a cause and its effect; between agent and action; between thinker and thought, and so on. None of these exist separately from the other. If we take the first example, a cause cannot exist separately before the arising of its effect because how could we explain the actual joining of the two in the process of production? For production to take place, there must be a moment in which both 'cause' and 'effect' exist side by side, simultaneously. If this were not the case, there would never be a connection between the two. It follows that for Madhyamikas the idea of sequential causation is absurd.

All these words are simply concepts that help to structure reality, but they do not withstand investigation and do not refer to distinct objects and entities that actually exist. According to this view, we have to leave common sense behind. In order to understand the true nature of things, which is shunyata, we have to find a way of apprehending non-conceptually because concepts just get in the way.

It is because concepts and thoughts are traps in our search for ultimate truth that Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse, a contemporary teacher of Tibetan Buddhism and author of *What Makes You Not a Buddhist*, says provocatively that "the whole purpose of Madhyamaka is to prove that everything we think is wrong." Language can lead us to the truth, but we have to go beyond language to understand it deeply. Madhyamaka is therefore utterly radical: it is a philosophy that urges us to go beyond philosophy.

It is interesting to note that in Madhyamaka, the distinction between relative and ultimate truths is made according to the viewpoint of the subject and not according to the object that is observed. The ultimate is what one sees when one apprehends things non-conceptually, and the relative is the conventional way of seeing things conceptually. Ultimate truth is the enlightened view whilst relative truth is the view of deluded beings. So reality, for a buddha, is always and only shunyata.

