

The Two Truths

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“For the sake of all sentient beings, who wander from lifetime to lifetime and who are to be found throughout all of endless space, I will accomplish the precious rank of a completely perfected buddha. In order to do so, I will exert myself in listening to, contemplating, and meditating upon the excellent dharma.” Thinking in that way, rouse your intention to achieve supreme awakening, and please listen.

To accomplish the rank of a buddha, it is important to understand well the presentations of the two truths.^a We may wonder why this is so. Truths for a concealer^b are the manner of appearance;^c ultimate truths^d are the manner of abiding.^e If we understand the manner of appearance and the manner of abiding just as they are, and if we meditate upon the manner of abiding, which is ultimate truth, the mistake of considering the manner of appearance to be true will collapse, and we will then be able to accomplish the rank of liberation^f and omniscience.^g

In this series of lectures, I will explain the stages of meditation upon emptiness. To meditate upon emptiness, we meditate upon ultimate truths, which are one of the two truths. For this reason, the explanations of the two truths made by the various exponents of Buddhist tenets ranging from the vehicle of Hearers^h to the Vajrayānaⁱ are important. Therefore, I will begin explaining the presentations of the two truths.

From among the many presentations of the two truths that have been made by the learned and accomplished ones of India, the land of superior persons, and also those that have been made by the learned and accomplished ones of the Land of Snow, on this occasion, I will offer you a presentation of the two truths made by one from the Land of Snow who was both learned and accomplished, Jamgön Lodrö Thaye,^j in his *Treasury Pervading All Objects of Knowledge*.^k

One Entity or Different Entities?

Initially, we investigate the relationship between the two truths. Are the two truths identical, or are they different?

**Conventionally, one nature but different isolates.
Ultimately, not expressible as identical or different.**

^a *bden gnyis*

^b *kun rdzob bden pa, saṃvṛtisatya*

^c *snang tshul*

^d *don dam bden pa, paramārthasatya*

^e *gnas tshul*

^f *thar pa*

^g *thams cad mkhyen pa*

^h *śrāvākayāna*

ⁱ *rdo rje'i theg pa*

^j *'jam dgon kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas, 1813-1899*

^k *shes bya kun khyab mdzod*

What does this mean? If we ask, “Are the two truths identical or different?”, we have to answer in two ways: in terms of conventions^a and in terms of the ultimate.^b The first line teaches the conventions:

Conventionally, one nature but different isolates.

Conventionally, the two truths are one entity^c or of one nature;^d however, they are different isolates.^e What does it mean to say that the two truths are of one nature? Considering their entity, nature, or abiding nature,^f they are of the same entity; two entities are not present. However, they are different isolates. What is an isolate? When we say “truth for a concealer” and “truth for the excellent,” different words and different letters are present. Also, they appear differently to thought. That makes them different isolates. Therefore, conventionally, the two truths are one entity and different isolates.

For instance, the sound of fingers snapping, that sound’s being a product, and that sound’s being impermanent are not divisible into different entities and do not have different entities. Rather, they are of the same entity. However, they are different isolates. Why? “Sound,” “product,” and “impermanent” are different words, and they appear differently to thought. Therefore, they are one entity and different isolates. That is how to think about this topic.

Ultimately, not expressible as identical or different.

As conventions, the two truths are one entity and different isolates; what about ultimately? Ultimately, they cannot be expressed as either identical or different, for they are beyond being either identical or different. The two truths are not one entity; neither are they different entities. So, what are they? Beyond identity and difference. This is easy, isn’t it?

***Reasoning harms the assertion of the two truths as ultimately identical; it also harms the assertion of the two truths as ultimately different. Why? If the two truths were ultimately identical, then, just as ordinary beings realize truths for a concealer in direct perception, they would also realize ultimate truths in direct perception. For instance, there would be the fault that, when sentient beings experience suffering directly, they would realize the emptiness that is the abiding nature of that suffering. Similarly, there would be the fault that, if the two truths were ultimately one entity, then, when anger arises and is experienced directly, its abiding nature would be realized. Similarly, if the two truths were ultimately one entity, when we see a hand, which conceals suchness, in direct perception, we would also realize its abiding nature, which is emptiness. As we know, that does not happen. What does happen when we see a hand? Hand’s abiding nature, which is an ultimate truth, is obstructed by thought considering the hand to be truly established, and for that reason is not seen.

^a *tha snyad*

^b *don dam, paramārtha*

^c *ngo bo*

^d *rang bzhin*

^e *ldog pa*

^f *gnas lugs*

Clearly, the two truths cannot ultimately be one entity. Are they different entities? If the two truths were different entities, then, sublime men and women would not be released from thoughts considering concealers of suchness to be truly established despite having realized ultimate truth in direct perception. Why? Because the two truths would be different entities.

The Assertions of the Individual Schools

The two truths can be explained in conjunction with the assertions of the various schools of tenets. That yields seven divisions: the Great Exposition School,^a the Followers of Sutra,^b Mind Only,^c Middle Way Autonomy,^d Middle Way Consequence,^e Empty-of-Other,^f and Mantra.^g *

The Exponents of Particulars

From among those seven, here are the root verses describing the way in which the Exponents of Particulars posit the two truths:

**When destroyed or dissected, apprehension as
that is suitable to be discarded or
Is not discarded; coarse things and durations of
consciousness are truths for concealers;
The partless are truths for excellence; that is the
system of the Great Exposition School.**

“Destroyed” refers to destruction of a thing that has form, such as a vase or a bottle, using a hammer or something similar. “Dissected” refers to analysis or dissection of consciousness, using wisdom. When a thing such as a vase is destroyed with a hammer, or when a consciousness is analyzed and dissected with wisdom, then the mind that apprehended the vase as a vase and the mind that apprehended the consciousness as a consciousness will be discarded. Where such procedures are suitable, the thing in question is a conventional truth. By contrast, tiny particles and moments of consciousness may be attacked with hammers or with wisdom, but they do not then disappear and the minds apprehending them will not then be discarded. In that case, the things in question are ultimate truths. In brief, coarse things and durations of consciousness are conventional truths. The two that have no parts—tiny particles of form that have no parts and moments of consciousness that have no parts—are ultimate truths. That summarizes the position taken by the Great Exposition School on this point.

In general, all exponents of tenets assert a mere presentation of the two truths. Furthermore, the Hearers say:

^a *bye brag smra ba, vaibhāśika*

^b *mdo sde pa, sautrāntika*

^c *sems tsam pa, cittamātra*

^d *dbu ma rang rgyud pa, svātantrika mādhyamika*

^e *dbu ma thal 'gyur pa, prāsaṅgika mādhyamika*

^f *gzhān stong pa*

^g *sngags*

When destroyed or mentally dissected,
 Mind does not engage it,
 Like a vase and water; such exist conventionally.
 The ultimately existent are other.

This passage comes from Vasubandhu's *Treasury of Higher Knowledge*.^a When a thing such as a vase has been destroyed by, for instance, a hammer, or when a continuum of consciousness has been dissected mentally into its individual constituents, the remaining fragments will not be conceived to be a vase or a continuum of consciousness. Smash a vase with a hammer; afterwards, you will not regard the shards as a vase. Start with a car, and then destroy it. Initially, you will think of it as a car; after destroying it, you will not think of the wreckage as a car. Alternatively, you may dissect things mentally, with similar results. For instance, mentally separate water into minute and individual parts; subsequently, you will not think of it as water. In that sense, vases, automobiles, and water exist conventionally. The ultimately existent are not like that. They cannot be dissipated either by force or by analysis; such phenomena are ultimate truths.

This passage from Vasubandhu's *Treasury of Higher Knowledge* has the same meaning as the verses given by Jamgön Kongtrül. Because of its importance, I have explained it separately.

When something has been destroyed by a destroyer such as a hammer, or when substantial phenomena have been dissected mentally, mind does not engage them, due to which they are will be discarded—a vase, the water in it, and so forth. Those are conventional phenomena.

What destroys things, causes them to fall apart, or disperses them? Hammers and so forth. What fits into “and so forth”? Bombs and such. These days, bombs destroy things and cause them to fall apart. Alternatively, mind may dissect substantial phenomena into their individual parts. For instance, consciousness may be dissected into individually distinct former and later moments. Before the hammer strikes the vase, mind considers the vase to be a vase. When a hammer has destroyed a vase, mind does not regard the fragments as a vase. Before the bomb lands on the building, mind considers the building to be a building. When the bomb has demolished the building mind does not regard the ruins as a building. Similarly, the water in the vase and the stuff inside the building will all fall into pieces, and mind will no longer conceive there to be water, chairs, tables, and so on. The vase, the water in the vase, the building, and the things inside the building—all of those are conventional phenomena.

When consciousness is generated through the [object's] influence without being discarded due to the shattering [of the object], as in the apprehension of forms, sounds, and so forth, [those objects are] ultimates. Both are posited as true in regard to existing as this and that entity. In brief, the Great Exposition School asserts that coarse

^a *mngon pa mdzod, abhidharmakośa*

things and durations of consciousness are conventional truths and that the irreducible moments of consciousness and the partless subtle particles of things are ultimate truths.

When, despite the shattering of [the object], consciousness remains able to engage [such objects], the objects qualify as those that are established by their own characteristics, and such specifically characterized phenomena^a are considered to be ultimate truths. To put it simply, this system of tenets asserts coarse things, such as vases and buildings, and a duration of consciousness—we have consciousness that has endured from early childhood until the present without interruption—are conventional truths. In contrast to such collections, they say, individual and irreducible moments of apprehending consciousness and the partless subtle particles of apprehended things are ultimate truths.

In brief, subtle particles having no parts, which are the objects apprehended by consciousnesses, and the irreducible moments of consciousnesses themselves are ultimate truths. They actually exist. They exist genuinely. They exist ultimately. Coarse things, such as vases and buildings, and durations of consciousness exist as mere designations and conventions; they are not true.

The Sūtra School

Ultimately able to perform functions or not able, Specifically or generally characterized—the system of the Sūtra School

What does this mean? Those that ultimately are able to perform functions are ultimate truths. Phenomena that ultimately are not able to perform functions are conventional truths. Ultimate truths are specifically characterized phenomena; conventional truths are generally characterized phenomena.^b Such assertions describe the tenets of the Sūtra School.

In support of these verses, Jamgön Kongtrül Lodrö Thaye cites a passage from the glorious Dharmakīrti's *Commentary on (Dignāga's) "Compendium of Valid Cognition."*^c Because Dharmakīrti was a great exponent of reasoning, his words bestow great blessing. Therefore, one must know them.

Whatever ultimately is able to perform a function,
That, here, exists ultimately.
Others exist conventionally.
Those are asserted to be of specific or general character.

Here, on this occasion, whatever phenomena are able to perform functions ultimately exist ultimately and are ultimate truths. What, then, are conventional truths? Phenomena other than

^a *rang mtshan, svalakṣaṇa*

^b *spyi mtshan, sāmānyalakṣaṇa*

^c *ishad ma nam 'grel gyi tshig le'ur byas pa, pramāṇavarttikakārikā*

those. Those phenomena that are able to perform functions ultimately have a specific character; phenomena that ultimately are not able to perform functions have a general character.

Accordingly, those [phenomena] that ultimately are able to perform functions, such as vases or pillars, are ultimate truths.

Let's put this in the form of definition^a and that which is defined.^b That which ultimately is able to perform a function serves as the definition, and this defines ultimate truth. As instances^c of each, we have vases and pillars. Are you surprised to learn that vases and pillars are ultimate truths?

Those [phenomena] that ultimately are not able to perform functions, such as space, the generality of vase, and the generality of pillar, are conventional truths.

Here, phenomena that ultimately are not able to perform functions serves as the definition, and this defines conventional truth. What serve as instances of that? Space, the generality of vase, and the generality of pillar. Space is a conventional truth; the generality of vase and the generality of pillar also are conventional truths. Putting this in the form of a syllogism,^d we have:

The subjects, space and the generalities of pillar and vase, are conventional truths because of not being able to perform functions ultimately.

In brief, the assertion of the two—those [phenomena] that exist with specific characteristics and those [phenomena] that exist with general characteristics—as that, and the assertion of existence as objects that are true is the system of Sūtra School.

Those phenomena that exist with specific characteristics are posited as ultimate truths, and those phenomena that exist with general characteristics are posited as conventional truths. What about “exist”? What is that? “Exist” signifies an object that is true. The presence of specific characteristics marks an object that is ultimately true; the presence of general characteristics marks an object that is true only conventionally. To exist with specific characteristics is to exist ultimately and as an object that is true ultimately; to exist with general characteristics is to exist conventionally and as an object that is true only conventionally.

Here, some later scholars explain that ultimate truth, impermanent, thing, composite and specifically characterized are equivalent, and that conventional truth, permanent, phenomenon that is not a thing, non-composite, and generally characterized are equivalent.

^a *mtshan nyid, lakṣaṇa*

^b *mtshon bya, lakṣya*

^c *mtshan gzhi*

^d *sbyor ba, prayoga*

Not everyone agrees. Some of the later scholars say this.

The relationship between ultimate truths and specifically characterized phenomena can be described in four doors of pervasion:^a (1) any ultimate truth is necessarily a specifically characterized phenomenon; (2) any specifically characterized phenomenon is necessarily an ultimate truth; (3) whatever is not an ultimate truth is necessarily not a specifically characterized phenomenon; (4) whatever is not a specifically characterized phenomenon is necessarily not an ultimate truth.

It is important to distinguish specifically characterized phenomena from generally characterized phenomena. For instance, there are three poles in this tent. Each of the three is a specifically characterized phenomenon, and as such they have no relationship with one another. Moreover, as specifically characterized phenomena, these three poles are ultimate truths, and they are actually present. How's that? They can do the work of holding this tent up. That, after all, is the definition of a pillar or a pole: it can perform the function of holding up a beam.^b We don't have beam here; we have a tent, so what these three poles do is to hold up this tent. Unrelated to one another and also not mixed with one another, these specifically characterized poles are ultimate truths. They are real. They do the job of holding this tent up. They keep this tent from falling down. That's what it means to hold something up: keep it from falling down. In the absence of these poles, the tent would fall down. In dependence upon the poles holding it up, the tent does not fall down. So these poles have an important job. Therefore, they are ultimate truths and really exist—according to the Sūtra School. Not according to the Middle Way School.

We need to look carefully at the ultimate truths that are asserted in the Sūtra School. They are unusual. They actually do something.

What is the pole that is a generally characterized phenomenon rather than a specifically characterized phenomenon. It is not any of the three poles holding this tent up. It has not been formed from sandalwood, juniper, or any other wood. It is not any particular pole. It is merely the opposite of not being a pole. It is merely the reverse of not being a pole. The dawning of a mere pole for the perspective of thought is the generality of pole. It is a conventional truth. It is not truly established. Such a pole—the one that dawns for the perspective of thought—cannot perform the function of supporting a beam. Neither can it hold this tent up. It suggests singularity, when in fact there is no such thing.

Each of the three specifically characterized poles in this tent performs its own tasks. Each one of them serves as an object an eye sense power and thus as an object for a directly perceiving, validly cognizing eye consciousness. The pole that serves as an object for thought cannot hold up this tent. Therefore, it is a conventional truth, merely imputed by thought.

Let us describe the relationship between conventional truths and generally characterized phenomena in two doors of pervasion:^c (1) any conventional truth truth is necessarily a generally characterized phenomenon; (2) any generally characterized phenomenon is necessarily a conventional truth.

When one says “pole,” a pole appears for the perspective of thought. That pole is a generally characterized phenomenon. Is that pole—the one that appears to thought—a pole from the past? No. Is it a pole from the future? Not exclusively. Is it a pole of the present? It does not belong solely to the present. That pole pervades the three times. It is not a particular pole of the

^a *khyab pa sgo bzhi*

^b *gdung 'degs pa'i don byed nus pa*

^c *khyab pa sgo gnyis*

present moment that could be found in the east, the south, the west, or the north. Rather, it pervades the three times and the four directions in the sense that it belongs equally to all of them and to none of them. For that reason, it is called a generality^a or generally characterized phenomenon.

When bringing this into experience, it will prove extremely helpful to distinguish specifically characterized phenomena from generally characterized phenomena in regard to suffering. What is the suffering that is specifically characterized? Bad feeling, which is beyond names, beyond conventional designations, and inexpressible. That bad experience is specifically characterized feeling. It is beyond names and beyond words; you can understand it in your own experience. According to the system of the Sūtra School, it is really present. The suffering that dawns for the perspective of thought is only conventional and is not really present. You may think, “I have been suffering continually from childhood until now.” That suffering is not present; it has been imputed by thought. What is present is the momentary experience that is beyond names and words. That is present, both ultimately and in fact. Except for that, there is nothing. If you apply specifically and generally characterized phenomena in this way, the system of the Sūtra School becomes profound.

The suffering that dawns for the perspective of thought is not present. Mere experience that is beyond names and words is present. What experience? Bad experience. However, that “bad” is not present in the entity of the experience, which is beyond names and words. Because we are not content until we have named our experience, we call it “bad experience,” but neither names nor words are present in the experience. Beyond names, beyond words. There is only experience beyond word and name. Moreover, past experience has ceased, future experience is not present, and experience of the present is momentary. That momentary suffering is an ultimate truth.

When one thinks, “From early childhood until now, I have suffered, and in the future I will continue to suffer,” thought imputes more than is present. The suffering that appears for the perspective of thought is conventional. It is not true. It is empty. It is not truly established. When one distinguishes specifically characterized suffering from generally characterized suffering in that way, the Sūtra School’s way of positing the two truths is a good one.

Specifically characterized suffering is an ultimate truth. Specifically characterized suffering of the past has ceased and will not recur. Specifically characterized suffering of the future has yet to occur or become established. Specifically characterized suffering of the present does not last more than a moment. In the single moment in which it arises, it also ceases. However, mere experience is present; mere experience of a tiny moment really does exist. That mere experience of a moment of feeling really does exist.

However, that brief moment is all that really does exist. One may consider past suffering still to be present, but past suffering has ceased; it is thought that sustains it. One may consider future suffering already to have arrived, but it has not; it is thought that brings future suffering into the present. Thought makes the suffering of the three times into one. Thought does an immense job. It makes the absent present. It gives birth to the unborn. Past suffering has ceased; thought makes it present now. Future suffering has yet to arise; thought makes it seem to have arisen. Present suffering ceases momentarily; thought makes it seem to remain and seems to make fleeting moments into things, solid and bulky things. It rolls all suffering into one. This thinking does a big job! One needs to understand the work that thinking does.

^a *spyi, sāmānya*

For example, this sound of fingers snapping (Khenpo Rinpoche snaps his fingers) is a specifically characterized phenomenon. It actually exists. It exists ultimately. However, it has ceased. It did not remain. It has gone.

Why is this sound of fingers snapping an ultimate existent and a specifically characterized phenomenon? In dependence upon this sound of fingers snapping, an ear consciousness can directly arise. A sense direct perception apprehending a sound^a can directly arise. The sound of fingers snapping is the condition that actually and directly gives rise to an ear consciousness. It performs that function. For that reason, the sound of fingers snapping is a specifically characterized phenomenon and an ultimate truth.

The sound of fingers snapping that dawns for the perspective of thought does not and will not do the work of giving rise to an ear consciousness. When one thinks about the sound of fingers snapping, the sound that appears to thought is a generally characterized phenomenon and will not do the work of giving rise to an ear consciousness. It cannot perform that function.

What is the abiding nature of these things that are specifically characterized phenomena? Things that are specifically characterized phenomena are utterly unrelated. How can that be? Listen to the sound of fingers snapping (Khenpo Rinpoche snaps his fingers three times). Those three sounds are individual. They are not, in fact, related to one another. In the perspective of thought, they appear to be related or linked to one another, but the sounds themselves are not related at all. They are individual.

Moreover, things that are specifically characterized phenomena do not become mixed with other things. Although placed together, they do not become mixed with one another. That they do not mix means that the minute particles that are specifically characterized phenomena do not blend one into the other; rather, they remain distinct. For instance, one may pour milk into water and say that the milk and water have become mixed or blended. Or, if one pours water into water, one thinks that the water from the two sources have blended together. It does seem that way to thought, but the minute particles have not blended with one another; they have remained separate and individual. Therefore, things that are specifically characterized phenomena are neither related nor mixed with other things. They cannot become linked to or blended with other things. If one understands the lack of relationship between and mixing of things that are specifically characterized phenomena, one understands the tenets of the Sūtra School well. This is said in terms of the abiding nature of objects.

For instance, suppose you were to mix a full bowl of powdered gold into a full bowl of sand. To the eye, it would appear that the gold and the sand have been mixed together. In fact, the particles of powdered gold remain distinct from the particles of sand. They have not blended; neither have they been linked. Each particle abides in its individuality. Similarly, all things are unmixed and unrelated. They are beyond mixture and relationship.

That is how specifically characterized phenomena must be explained in the system of the Sūtra School. “All things abiding in their own entities are unrelated.” That comes from Sakya Paṇḍita’s treatise on valid cognition, the *Treasure of Valid Cognition and Reasoning*,^b where he wrote that all things abiding in their own entities have utterly no relationship with one another. In Dharmakīrti’s *Commentary on Valid Cognition*,^c there are a great many reasonings establishing

^a *sgra ’dzin dbang po mngon sum*

^b *tshad ma rigs pa’i gter*

^c *tshad ma mam ’grel*

that specifically characterized phenomena have no relationship with one another that generally characterized phenomena are not things.

This afternoon I have given a brief explanation of the way in which the two truths are posited in the Particularist School and in the Sūtra School. This completes the survey of the two truths for the traditions of the Hearers. It would be a mistake to think that, because these two presentations come from the tradition of the Lesser Vehicle, they cannot be of much importance. Do not regard them in that way. If you investigate and analyze these presentations well, their meaning will become subtle. Consider their subtlety.