

Who Am I, Really¹?

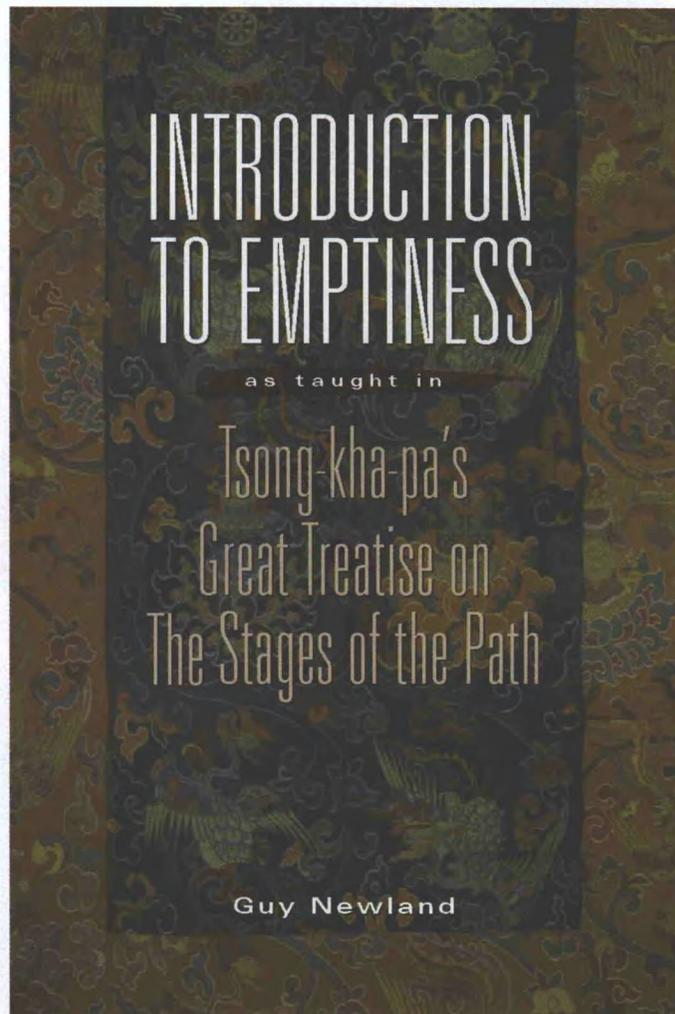
By Guy Newland

A Puzzle

Near the outset of her adventures in Wonderland, Alice asks, “I wonder if I’ve been changed in the night? Let me think: *was* I the same when I got up this morning? I almost think I can remember feeling a little different. But if I’m not the same, the next question is ‘Who in the world am I?’ Ah, *that’s* the great puzzle!” Alice then ponders whether she has been changed into her friend Ada, or else perhaps has had the misfortune to become her friend Mabel. For if she has been changed, she has indeed become someone else – and it might well be someone she knows!

Those who love and raise children experience the poignancy of their rapid transformation from baby to toddler, young child, adolescent, and then adult. Is the baby I rocked on my chest the same person as this young man? Or is this a different person? We may notice the same problem, and perhaps a similar poignancy, when we look at old photographs. Am I the same person as, or a different person from, the nine-year-old Guy in the photograph? It feels hard to give either answer.

If we are pressed to stay focused on this question and to give an answer, we quickly begin to get uncomfortable. Is it the same person or a different person? Our discomfort may cause us to change the subject, dismissing the teacher or the book that is pressing us to work out the “great puzzle” of who we are. Our discomfort is based on a profound dissonance between how things really are – flowing, ungraspable, intermingling – and how we usually think and talk about them – as discrete and autonomous concrete units. Meditating on emptiness means committing yourself to going deeper and deeper into that dissonance so that it intensifies and becomes almost unbearable – as though there



were a small child screaming in your ear demanding to know: *Who are you? How do things exist?*²

Intrusive Elephants and Married Bachelors

Let’s begin by summarizing the steps in meditative analysis. First, we must identify in introspective meditation our own conception of intrinsic nature. This false self is like a demon that has caused us infinite torment. We can lure the demon out into the light by imagining situations of righteous indignation, in which one has been falsely accused, and then watching like a spy from a corner of the mind, trying

¹ Based mainly on the *Great Treatise*, Volume 3, Chapters 21 and 22

² Adapted from Jeffrey Hopkins, *Emptiness Yoga* (Snow Lion Publications, 1987), 207

to observe just what one's sense of self is like at that time. Without some exercise like this, it is tough to catch ourselves in the act of self-reification. The point is that we must notice within our own experience the ignorance that is the root of our cyclic existence, our own misconception of ourselves as having intrinsic nature.

Then, we have to set before ourselves a limited but *comprehensive* set of alternatives for how such a nature might exist if it did, in fact, exist. As an analogy, suppose someone were suffering from the delusion that there was an elephant in the house. We could make a comprehensive list of all the rooms in the house, or perhaps a list of all the spaces in the house that might in any way be large enough to contain an elephant. Then we could ask the deluded person to set it very firmly in mind that, were there an elephant in the house, it would absolutely have to be in one of those rooms. If he had some doubt, then we could add more places to the list, even if they seemed logically unnecessary, until he was able to feel decisively confident that any elephant located in the house would *have* to be in one of those places.

Then, when a search of each room turned up no elephant, the force of his sense that, "There is simply nowhere else for an elephant to be" would be converted into the realization that, quite contrary to his delusion, there is no elephant in the house at all.

The case of the married bachelor is another analogy that, while superficially strange, gives us a picture of the analytical process as a whole. Suppose there is a person who is causing herself and others needless suffering, and suppose that at the back of these problems is her misconception that she will be happy only when she finds a married bachelor. We help her first to recognize that she has this misconception – to notice how this strange idea appears within her own mind. Then we consider the alternatives: the married bachelor must be either wed or unwed. When she has a strong sense of conviction that these two choices exhaust all possibilities, we can then rule out each of the alternatives through what appears to *us* to be ridiculously obvious analysis: he cannot be wed because he is a bachelor; he cannot be unwed because he is married. For someone who has been in the thrall of a harmful delusion, it

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is vital to work through each step carefully. This should allow her to see, with certainty, that she was grasping after something that is not there and never could exist at all.

While strange, this analogy has advantages over the elephant in the house. The analogy of the married bachelor illustrates how the process of analyzing intrinsic nature is a case of logically limiting alternatives and refuting each one. It is not a physical searching, as with the elephant. Moreover, while unlikely, it really is possible for there to be an elephant in the house; the married bachelor is impossible. It happens to be the case that there are no elephants in my house right now, and it may happen to be the case that unicorns have never existed anywhere. But – like the married bachelor – persons who exist in and of themselves, by way of their own essential natures, simply *cannot* exist, now or ever.

Analyzing a Chariot

Madhyamaka treatises include many different arguments refuting any essentialist view. In the *Great Treatise*, Tsong-kha-pa describes the process of meditative analysis of the intrinsic self of the person mainly in terms of one particular argument known as the lack of sameness and difference (*gcig du bral*). He first exemplifies how this argument works by analyzing a chariot and then applies the same argument to the person.

Tsong-kha-pa's explanation of the "lack of sameness and difference" begins by describing what has been known as the law of the excluded middle. It has sometimes been said, quite erroneously, that this principle is absent in non-Western logics. Sometimes we still encounter the perspective that Asian religions, or Buddhism in particular, are about mystical experience to the exclusion of rational analysis. Let's

consider one of Tsong-kha-pa's statements of the excluded middle in the *Great Treatise*:³

In the general case, we see in the world that when a phenomenon is mentally classified as accompanied, it is precluded from being unaccompanied, and when it is classified as unaccompanied, it is precluded from being accompanied. In general, therefore, same and different, as well as singular and plural, preclude any further alternative because the unaccompanied and the accompanied are [respectively] singular and plural.

In other words, accompanied and unaccompanied, like wed and unwed, are X and not-X. What is unaccompanied is alone, singular, and identical to itself. It is not diverse because it is one thing. What is accompanied is plural and diverse. So the basic principle that anything that exists must be either X or not-X entails that anything that exists must be either single or plural, must be either self-identical or diverse.

Tsong-kha-pa then uses this principle to limit the alternatives in the analysis of intrinsic nature:

When you determine in the general case [that anything must be either] one or not one, then you will also determine that for the particular case [of something that exists essentially, it must be either] essentially one or essentially different.

So if a chariot, for example, had an essential or intrinsic nature, such would have to be demonstrated by rigorous analysis of whether it is identical to its parts or intrinsically different from them.

Is the chariot the same as its parts? No, for if it were, then just as the parts of a chariot are several and diverse, so the chariot too would be plural; or else, just as there is a single chariot there would only be one part. If the chariot were identical to its parts, then, since we say that a chariot *has* parts, the possessing agent would be identical to the possessed object. If agent and

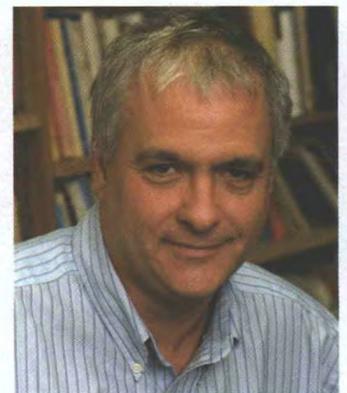
object could be identical in this way, then fire and fuel could just as well be identical. Simply putting a log (the burned object) in a cold fireplace should warm up the room because the burned object is the same as the burning agent, fire.

On the other hand, a chariot is not essentially separate from its parts because if it were we would see cases of chariots appearing without any chariot parts, just as horses and cows can appear separately insofar as they are separate.

Since a chariot can be found neither among its parts nor essentially separate from them, it must lack an essential nature. This is because if there were an essentially existent chariot, it would have to be findable under this sort of analysis. The knowledge that things lack essential reality is a liberating insight into emptiness, the absence of intrinsic existence.

Another important point to note is that for Tsong-kha-pa the final basis for any argument, including this refutation of essential reality, is information provided by ordinary conventional consciousness. We see that a log is different from a flame, that a horse is different from a cow, that being accompanied is different from being unaccompanied. It is from this ordinary factual knowledge that we can develop arguments against essential nature. Our ordinary conventional consciousnesses are mistaken in that a log appears to them as though it were essentially real, but at the same time these conventional consciousnesses provide accurate and practical information. Not only can we use this information to light a fire – or select a car – but we also definitely need this information in order to form the argument against essential nature. As Tsong-kha-pa says, “Even when you analyze reality, the final basis for any critique derives from unimpaired conventional consciousnesses.”

From Introduction to Emptiness as taught in Tsong-kha-pa's Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path by Guy Newland 2008. This book gives a wonderful explanation of emptiness, so clear and understandable, with such ingenious examples that this most important of Buddhist topics, which is sometimes difficult to define, becomes radiantly simple. Published by Snow Lion Publications, paperback US\$14.95 www.SnowLionPub.com



³ Elsewhere, Tsong-kha-pa uses the excluded middle (*Great Treatise*, Volume 3: 146-147) and backs it up with a citation from Nagarjuna: “Limiting things to two possibilities – either they intrinsically exist or they do not – derives from the universal limitations that anything imaginable either exists or does not exist. Similarly, the limitation that what truly exists must either truly exist as single or truly exist as plural is based on the universal limitation that anything must be either single or plural. When there is such a limitation, any further alternative is necessarily precluded; hence it is utter nonsense to assert a phenomenon that is neither of those two. As Nagarjuna's *Vigrahavyavartani* says: If the absence of intrinsic existence were overturned/Intrinsic existence would be established.”