

Tsongkhapa's Theory of Illusory-like Persons

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Introduction

Persons, according to Tsongkhapa bLo bzang Grags pa (1357 – 1419 CE) are illusory-like. They are illusory-like because while existing truly in one sense, they are nonetheless thoroughly unreal. For Superiors¹ (ārya, 'phags pa) this seemingly paradoxical statement is, in fact, a straightforward description of how persons exist in reality. Ordinary beings, however, do not apprehend persons as illusory-like. Rather persons appear and are conceived to exist, as if by way of their own character (svalakṣaṇasiddha, rang gi mtshan nyid kyis grub pa) or established through their own power (svairīśiddhi, rang dbang du grub pa). For Tsongkhapa the appearance of intrinsically real persons is false and deceptive.

Tsongkhapa's philosophical analysis of personhood is about solving the problem of existential suffering. The solution to this problem is found in the extirpation of the conceptions of reified essence. The conception that persons possess intrinsic essence functions as the root cause of existential suffering, as it is a necessary condition for the arising of afflicted states of mind. These conceptions of intrinsic essence pervade the cognitive process of unenlightened beings propelling them into dysfunctional actions, in a self-perpetuating cycle of false appearances and dysfunctional actions.

In this paper, I will argue, not only did Tsongkhapa correctly understand Nāgārjuna's emptiness thesis as put forward in his Madhyamaka treatise *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, but by positing validly² established conventional persons within the scope of the doctrine of the Two Truths, he added considerably to the

debate on personal identity. I will do this by showing that persons do not possess any kind of absolute ontological status. That appearances and conceptions of an objective referent of self, person or "I" are non-existent imaginaries. Moreover, any notion that an invariant property of any kind is that which binds diachronic and synchronic first-person experience is an incoherent thesis, and like-wise a non-existent imaginary.

However, I will claim that despite this, it is possible to posit persons, existing as mere fictional phenomena within the framework of a kind of interdependent dynamic system. I will do this by arguing that what is being rejected here is not the existence of persons, but rather the existence of (1) a non-fabricated objective agent of experience, (2) any notion of an variant or invariant property of any kind, at any level of discourse which *is* the self or person, or is acting *as* a self or person, and (3) intrinsic identity (svalakṣaṇa, rang gi mtshan nyid) at any level. I will thereby show that from within the framework of a conventional discourse, persons are merely conventional phenomena and this scheme leaves intact functional first-person experience. Thus a two-fold illusory-like exegesis of personhood when couched within a Two Truths (satyadvaya, bden pa gnyis) discourse, first laid out by Nāgārjuna 2nd CE, further clarified by Candrakīrti 7th CE and developed by Tsongkhapa 14th CE is a cogent thesis that resolves the tension between the seemingly contradictory thesis of no-self (anātman) and the givenness of first person experience.

Madhyamaka Deconstructionalism: Establishing the Real

For Tsongkhapa *self* (bdag), *person* (gang zag) and *I* (nga) are synonymous. When Tsongkhapa speaks of a self of persons (pudgalātman, gang zag gi bdag) he is not referring to the conventionally existent person merely imputed in dependence on the psychophysical elements. Rather, *self* here refers to an *intrinsically existent self*. *Intrinsic essence* (svabhāva, ngo bo) has the connotation of *independence* (rang stobs bltos pa med pa can) or *objective* (yul gyi steng nas grub pa) existence.

Various Indian and Tibetan philosophical literature parse up to twelve different meanings of the term *svabhāva*³. From among these twelve Tsongkhapa is mainly concerned with a *fabricated nature* (bcos ma'i rang bzhin) such as the heat of fire, a non-existent *object-to-be-negated nature* (pratisedhya, dgag bya'i rang bzhin) such as intrinsic essence, and a *final nature* (dharmatā, rang bzhin chos nyid) such as emptiness (śūnyatā, stong pa nyid). Thus the term *selflessness of persons* refers to the non-existence of an inherently existence person, not to the inherent non-existence of persons. Let us now turn to Tsongkhapa's deconstructionist dialect in order to clarify this claim.

For Tsongkhapa, if persons were to possess intrinsic essence this could be established through critical analysis. In *Ocean of Reasoning* Tsongkhapa has the following to say:⁴

If the self – the object of self-grasping – existed inherently, one could not escape two alternatives regarding its mode of existence. Thus we should analyse to determine whether it, through its own characteristics, is identical to or different from the aggregates.

In both Indian and Tibetan Madhyamaka treatises, deconstruction of a chariot is used to illustrate various naive misconceptions of the relation between chariots and their properties. Thus showing that persons are in fact mere imputations. In his philosophical treatise *Path to Enlightenment* (here after *Lam rim chen mo*)⁵ Tsongkhapa starts this analysis by citing Candrakīrti's *Madhyamakāvatāra*:⁶

A chariot is neither asserted to be other than its parts, nor to be non-other. It does not possess them. It does not depend on the parts and the parts do not depend on it. It is neither the mere collection of the parts, nor is it their shape. It is like this.

For both Candrakīrti and Tsongkhapa, if persons existed as either (1) a non-fabricated objective agent of experience, (2) a variant or invariant property which *is* the self, or is acting *as* a self, or (3) intrinsic identity this would entail the existence of independent, objective, or intrinsic essence. It would then follow that the relation

between such a self and its properties could be established in one of the following seven ways: (1) one with its properties; (2) separate from its properties; (3) the possessor of its properties; (4) the basis for its properties, (5) dependent on its properties; (6) the collection of its properties; or (7) the shape of its properties. If a self or persons cannot be found when placed under critical analysis no such self exists.

Let us now turn to the first of the seven-fold analysis: (1) *the self does not exist one with its properties*. If the self were intrinsically one with its properties, we could isolate each property of the psychophysical elements and analyse whether it is a self or is acting as a self. Upon doing so, it is clear that the head is not a self; it is a head. The left arm is not a self nor does it act as a self. Moreover, if the self existed as one with its properties, it would follow that just as there are many properties to a person there would be many selves. If there is only one person that is one with its properties, there must be only one property to that person. This would render statements such as "I hurt my toe" meaningless, as the toe would be the self and the self would be the toe. Perhaps one could argue that when we stub our toe, we naturally think we have hurt ourselves, as if our toe is one with the self. At these times we do not naturally think of the toe as being something separate from ourselves. While this may be true, it does not follow that the self is one with its properties, for if it were, we could not differentiate the cognition of pain, the toe, and the self. Moreover, if someone were to enquire as to what the problem was, pointing to our toe and saying, "*I stubbed my toe and it hurts!*" would be quite unnatural for we would in fact be pointing at the self. We can see from this analysis that the psychophysical elements, which are the basis of imputation of persons, are neither a self nor a person.

The next of the seven-fold analysis is: (2) *the self does not exist separate from its properties*. If the self were intrinsically separate from its properties it would be possible to apprehend the self. This is because the self and its properties would be

two distinct intrinsically separate phenomena. We could isolate each property of to search for this self. Yet such a process does not yield the apprehension of a self. Therefore, self or persons do not exist intrinsically separate from their properties. Moreover, if the self and its properties were intrinsically separate, there would be no logical reason to impute self in relation to its properties. For Tsongkhapa, a self that exists separate from its properties, being an intrinsically separate entity would be unrelated to its properties. If the self and its properties were unrelated the following statements would be impossible: "I hurt myself" or "I hurt my tongue" when drinking hot tea. This is because the person doing the drinking and the properties - lips, mouth, or tongue - are unrelated. Why, because of being intrinsically different entities. It would not be the self that is feeling pain, but rather the lips or tongue. Therefore statements such as "I burnt myself" would be meaningless at best. There needs to be a functioning relationship between the self and its properties in order for these statements to be meaningful.

Let us now move onto the third of the seven-fold analysis: (3) *the self does not possess its properties*. For Tsongkhapa the possibility of intrinsic possession is also untenable. If there were a self that intrinsically possessed its properties it would be by way of either a separate entity, like a person and his car or as the same entity, as in a person and his ear. If there were a real and findable self that is the possessor of its properties, this would entail that the possessor was either one with that possessed and this would entail sameness of entity, or separate from that possessed and this would entail difference of entity. From sameness of entity, it follows that the self could be found by simply isolating each property to see whether *it* is in fact a self or a person. From otherness of entity follows the possibility of propertyless persons. If there were such things as propertyless persons, it would be possible to apprehend "Clarke" without the apprehension of some property of Clarke. Clearly this is not possible.

Someone could raise an objection here: if I do not possess properties, how can I speak of them? How can I say, "I burnt my lip on this hot cup of tea" if the self does not possess its properties? However, we need to be careful that we are not conflating mere possession with the possession of properties by an intrinsically existent self. Tsongkhapa is arguing against the existence of an intrinsically existent person, not whether a person *has* lips, nor whether a statement such as "I burnt my lip" is functional.

We will cover the next two together: (4) *the self is not the basis for its properties* and (5) *the self is not dependent on its properties*. Tsongkhapa says in *Lam rim chen mo*:⁷

A chariot is not the basis for its parts, like a bowl holding yogurt, nor does it rest in its parts, like Devadatta in a tent... because such relationships could be demonstrated only if a chariot and its parts were essentially separate.

What is being refuted here is not mere mutual existence but rather the misconception that an intrinsically existent self exists as either the basis for its properties or depends on its properties for its existence. For Tsongkhapa this assertion would entail inherent otherness and therefore a difference of entity. How could a self that is either the basis for its properties or is dependent on its properties be the basis for both physical and non-physical properties?⁸ If the self were the basis for its properties or dependent on its properties, it would follow that organ replacement would either be impossible or would result in one set of the psychophysical elements having two persons. This is because the self of one person would be dependent on the properties of another person for its existence. Therefore the self post-organ transplant would either be an entirely new person or there would be two people existing within one mind-body configuration.

The sixth of the seven-fold analysis is: (6) *the self is not the collection of its properties*. This too is untenable for it follows that the collection of the properties of aggregated in a different configuration or even lying in a heap on the ground would

be the person. While some reductionists argue the person to be the mere collection of the psychophysical elements⁹, if the person were the mere collection of the psychophysical elements, just as the body and mind are constantly changing, the self would like-wise be in a constant state of flux. From this it would follow: the self of one moment would be entirely different from the self of the next moment, because if an intrinsically existent self that is changing each moment and exists under its own power, would be unrelated to the self of the next moment because of being an entirely different self from the previous moment. Therefore, statements such as "I remember a time when..." would be impossible, for the self doing the remembering would be remembering an event related to a different self.

An objection could be raised here: it is not the mere collection of the properties, but rather a particular configuration of properties that make the mere collection, the person. Yet from this position the following would occur. Let us say you had a dog called, Lucky. Lucky is a healthy dog with four legs, a tail and all the right properties in the correct configuration and therefore according to you a dog called Lucky. One day Lucky gets hit by a car and has one leg removed, yet survives and becomes, Lucky - the three-legged dog. Although Lucky was not so lucky that day, he is still Lucky the dog, the same dog as before, albeit minus a leg. But according to the position of the above objector, Lucky was the mere collection of his properties prior to the accident. According to the objection: Lucky is the mere collection of four legs, a tail and so forth in a particular configuration. It follows that the mere collection of properties in a certain configuration cannot be the person, otherwise pre-accident Lucky would either no longer exist or post-accident Lucky would be an entirely new dog.

The last of the seven-fold analysis is: (7) *the self is not the shape of its properties*. If the self were the shape of its properties, one could ask as Tsongkhapa does, is the self the shape of the individual properties or the shape of the collection?¹⁰ If it is the former, it follows that the self is the shape of both the body

and mind. If it is the latter, then the “Lucky dog” argument ensues, because it would not be possible for properties of the person to come into and go out of existence.

Someone may argue however that although the properties of the self such as arms and legs have their own shape prior to assembly, once assembled correctly, a self appears as the shape of its properties. From this it follows: the shape of the properties would be something other than the properties, because the shape has come into existence after the assembly of the properties in this particular configuration. That is, the assembly was the preceding cause for the generation of the shape. However, if that were the case, it would be possible to find this self, which would be a shape. Moreover what shape is there that can think, “I am hungry”? What is being negated here is not conventionally existent persons imputed in dependence on the shape of the properties but rather an intrinsically existent person that is the shape of its properties.

After completing the seven-fold analysis some may conclude that because when one searches for a self but cannot find a self, no self exists. For them persons are utterly non-existent, thus statements such as “this is *my* arm” or “*I* remember such and such a time” are utterly meaningless. They fail to see how persons can exist and function when there is not some property or a collection of properties that is some kind of agent or proxy for a so-called *real* self. This goes to the heart of the reductionists’ mistake. They believe being reductionist about persons is a necessary condition for functional personhood. Tsongkhapa would disagree, and here is why.

The above analytic process searching for an intrinsic self does not affirm the utter non-existence of self or persons; rather it affirms the non-existence of a particular kind of person, one that for Tsongkhapa has never existed - an intrinsically existent person¹¹. The importance of correctly identifying the object of negation is vital in Tsongkhapa’s Madhyamaka dialectic. If one under negates, subtle psychological misconceptions remain, and it is these misconceptions that

obstruct enlightenment. If one over negates thinking persons are utterly nonexistent, this too further obscures enlightenment as it undermines ethical conduct.

Thus, according to Tsongkhapa, to speak of persons existing as either one with the psychophysical elements or entirely separate from them, not only contravenes conventional usage but, also steps outside of the scope of conventional logic.

Madhyamaka Constructionalism: Establishing the Unreal

So far we have established that if persons exist over and above mere worldly conventions, they would do so either as one with or separate from their properties. Thus it is said that persons do not exist inherently. Given this claim, how does Tsongkhapa delineate conventional truth as "truth", how does this relate to personhood and can this view be reconciled with Candrakīrti's claim that conventional truths are false and deceptive?

In his discussions on conventionalities from *Lam rim chen mo* Tsongkhapa cites Candrakīrti's *Madhyamakāvatāra* saying:¹²

The chariot is not established in the seven ways, either in reality or for the world. Yet without analysis, just for the world, it is imputed in dependence upon its parts.

For Tsongkhapa, when the chariot is searched for *the* chariot cannot be found at either the ultimate or conventional levels of reality. However, when reason fails to find *the* chariot existing as either one with its properties or separate from them, this does not refute the chariot's mere existence. As Tsongkhapa goes on to say:¹³

Reasoning that analyses whether things intrinsically exist does not establish the assertion of the chariot; rather, leaving reasoned analysis aside, it is established by a mere, unimpaired, ordinary, conventional i.e., worldly – consciousness.

Thus, for Tsongkhapa, persons mere existence is established by means of a conventional cognitive process imputing 'person' in dependence on what worldly conventions constitute as being the properties of personhood. Dependence on what worldly conventions constitute as being the properties of persons, rules out the possibility of *mere* subjectivity. Mere subjectivity would allow the imputation of *horse* to the properties of a donkey. Tsongkhapa is not asserting mere subjectivity. In pan-Mahayana parlance the imputational nature of a persons and persons lack of intrinsic essence is laid out as the doctrine of the Two Truths - an ultimate truth (paramārthasatya, dom dam bden pa) and a conventional truth (samvṛtisatya, kun rdzob bden pa).

Tsongkhapa, closely following Candrakīrti, articulates the ontology of phenomena by positing the Two Truths as two natures of one entity. The claim that the Two Truths are two natures of one entity is pivotal to Tsongkhapa's assertion that conventional truths are false, deceptive and yet a "truth". Moreover, the claim that ultimate truth is both a non-implicative negation (prasajyapratiṣedha, med dgag) and also empty of intrinsic essence rests on the claim that the Two Truths are two natures of the same entity. Let us unpack this.

In *Ocean of Reasoning* Tsongkhapa quotes Candrakīrti saying:¹⁴

Through seeing all phenomena both as real and as unreal, the two natures of the objects that are found are grasped. The object of the perception of reality is the way things really are. That which is seen falsely is called the conventional truth.

While properties such as the shape or color are called its 'nature' because 'that which is seen falsely is called the conventional truth'. Ultimate truth is '*The object of the perception of reality is the way things really are*'. The ultimate reality of persons is their lack of intrinsic essence. The fact they persons lack intrinsic essence means they do not exist inherently, and thus this is a persons final 'nature'. Thus persons have two distinct natures: a conventional nature that is apprehended by a

conventional cognitive process apprehending a persons false and deceptive appearance, and an ultimate nature that is apprehended by an ultimate cognitive process apprehending persons the way they exist under ultimate analysis¹⁵.

According to Tsongkhapa, persons are conventionally true for both Superiors and ordinary beings. Persons lack of intrinsic essence is their ultimate reality, their ultimate nature and hence their ultimate truth. Persons imputational nature, on the other hand, is their conventional reality, conventional nature, and hence it is a person's conventional truth. Thus for Tsongkhapa, ultimate truth and conventional truth are not only apprehended by two distinct cognitive processes, they are two distinct dimensions of one and the same world¹⁶.

So that raises the question: if persons are conventionally true and therefore in a sense real, how can they be false and deceptive? It seems to be a contradiction for something to be a truth and yet be false and deceptive. In order to make sense of this let us cache out three distinct senses of the term conventional - *saṃvṛti*. Tsongkhapa following Candrakīrti parses these three as follows: (1) *Samvṛti* as *worldly conventions* ('jig rten gyi tha snyad), (2) *saṃvṛti* as *mutually interdependent or mutually supporting* (paraparasambhavana, phan tshun brten pa) and (3) *saṃvṛti* as *obstructing suchness* (de kho na nyid la sgrib pa). Thupten Jinpa lays out the first and third of these best when he says: *saṃvṛti* as a worldly convention is "... *the valid framework within which language, concepts, logic, and how the conventions of the world operate*", while the third meaning is "... *that which obscures the ultimately empty nature of things*"¹⁷. Perhaps the second meaning, *saṃvṛti* *mutually interdependent*, could be rendered as: *a groundless matrix of conventional cognitions that are co-created and mutually supporting within the scope of that which accords with the conventions of the world*. They are *groundless* in the sense that there is no intrinsic substratum within which they are held up. Worldly conventions are both the bootstrapper and that which holds the framework together, allowing the framework to function without the need for an intrinsic substratum.

Worldly conventions are *co-created*, because the imputed phenomena in this case persons, the basis of imputation that is, the psychophysical elements, and the imputing consciousness arise simultaneously.

Let us take a closer look at the first of these senses of *saṃvṛti*. *Saṃvṛti* as “*a valid framework within which language, concepts, logic and the conventions of the world operate*”. Tsongkhapa citing Candrakīrti says: “*worldly conventions have the character of the object of expression and means of expression, knower and the object known*”¹⁸. Tsongkhapa argues this sense of *saṃvṛti* should not be taken to mean that worldly conventions are merely subjective, for if everything they were merely subjective; it would be possible to label a donkey, ‘horse’. As Thomas Nagel has eloquently said:¹⁹

The claim ‘everything is subjective’ must be nonsense, for it would itself have to be either subjective or objective. But it cannot be objective, since in that case it would be false if true. And it can’t be subjective, because then it would not rule out any objective claim, including the claim that it is objectively false.

Because the second sense of *saṃvṛti* as *mutual interdependence* is included within the first - *saṃvṛti* as *worldly conventions* - this negates the possibility of subjectivity. This is because subjects and objects are co-created, mutually supporting and ontologically dependent. Not merely in a causal sense, but in a deeper, metaphysical sense. Thus it is this second sense of *saṃvṛti* that gives the power to the first and shows that it is not simply a subjectivity thesis at play here.

Because persons do not exist ultimately, yet for the world function, existence equals conventional existence²⁰. However, if existence equals conventional existence and thus persons do not possess essence or substance, one could ask: how can we objectively establish conventional persons, if persons cannot be found via critical analysis? Put another way, how can a conventional cognitive process establish an unfindable nonexistent entity? Well, the answer is they cannot. Although persons cannot be found among their properties or separate from them,

persons conventional existence (kun rdzob tu yod pa) is empirically established by the certification of an unimpaired cognitive process. Although the cognitive process which acts as the certifier of worldly conventions does not exist ultimately, there is no need for a certifier of the certifier, because the cognitive process and that which it apprehends are co-created and mutually supporting, thus mutually certifying. Therefore, it is this mutually interdependence that makes it possible to posit persons without the need to postulate (1) a non-fabricated objective agent of experience, (2) any notion of an variant or invariant property of any kind, at any level of discourse which *is* the self or person, or is acting *as* a self or person, or (3) intrinsic identity at any level. For Tsongkhapa it is this matrix of conventional cognitions, which acts as a kind of interdependent dynamic system that gives rise to the world.

Yet, the apprehension of coiled rope in dim light as a snake is said to be in accordance with worldly perspectives. Tsongkhapa calls such perceptions that which is known to the conventions of the world. Thus worldly conventions are equivalent to things that are experienced and arise as intentional objects (dmigs yul) of consciousness. This is because cognitive illusions such as rope-snakes are commonplace in the world and they form an integral part of our everyday interactions with the world²¹. Given this rather inclusive presentation of conventionalities, Tsongkhapa needs to delineate some distinction between accurate and inaccurate conventional cognitions, otherwise there will be no method to determine what exists and what does not. Tsongkhapa does so by using the conventions of the world to do just that.

While it is clear that a rope-snake is some kind of intentional object, it is not clear given the third sense of *samvṛti* how the conventions of the world can in fact determine whether a rope-snake is an existent or a non-existent? Though a snake imputed to an actual snake's body and a snake imputed to a rope are both empty of intrinsic essence and hence do not inherently exist, without any special analysis, common worldly intellect can easily apprehend which one is an imputedly existent

phenomena and thus established as an existent, and which one is a cognitive illusion and thus a non-existent. By simply approaching phenomena to see if the coordination between the basis of imputation and the imputed object are valid, one can determine based on the conventions of the world whether in fact this imputation is correct or not. As the former can perform the worldly function of a snake while the latter cannot, the conventions of the world are what establish what exists for the world.

However, to exist does not mean to exist for thought alone as coordination between the basis of imputation (prajaptadharma, btags chos) and the imputed object (prajñāpya, gdags gzhi) is required²². For Tsongkhapa, it is both a cognitive process that imputes snake, and a cognitive process that referees the coordination of the imputed object with its basis of imputation. Although a rope-snake may perform the function of generating fear it cannot actually bite a person. Therefore, that which is able to perform its worldly function and is not repudiated by another conventional cognition, is a valid conventional phenomenon. The conventional cognitive process that apprehends rope-snake is therefore considered to be an inaccurate conventional cognition and the imputed phenomena, the snake, is a non-existent. By seeing the distinction between snake and rope-snake, we can begin to get a sense of what Tsongkhapa means by “truth” in relation to conventions.

Tsongkhapa adds yet another criterion for the validity of conventional phenomena. The assertion is as follows: for conventional phenomena to be valid, they must one be invalidated in relation to their ultimate status. However, Tsongkhapa himself claims that nothing can withstand ultimate analysis. So how are we meant to understand this third criterion? The purpose of this third criterion is refutation of Buddhist and non-Buddhist Foundationalists who posit, as he puts it:

A partless subject and object, a self, a primal essence, a divine creator – such things are imaginary constructs put forward in the unique assertions of Buddhist and non-Buddhist essentialists. When they posit such, they do so

after rational analysis of whether such things essentially exist; they think that this sort of rational analysis will discover these things.

Tsongkhapa uses the Foundationalists' own assertions to determine whether they in fact exist. They claim that things such as a self, essence or the mind-basis-of-all (*Ālayajñāna*, *kun gzhi rnam shes*) can withstand rational analysis, and thus the Foundationalists must agree, Tsongkhapa argues, that others using rational analysis could also find these phenomena. For Tsongkhapa when analysed, such things cannot withstand analysis and are therefore refuted. As the positing of functional persons in Tsongkhapa system is not predicated on the notion of an agent of experience, properties, or essence, this third criterion does not harm his system.

While there is things that are "known to the world" yet do not exist even conventionally, Tsongkhapa does not accept *everything* that is so called "known to the world"²³. While conventional phenomena are objects of knowledge (*shes bya*), not all objects of knowledge are necessarily conventional truths²⁴. That is to say, there are true and false intentional objects, yet it is only the intentional objects that fit all three criteria that are conventional truths. Furthermore, Emptiness while being an object of knowledge is not a conventional truth, because it is that which appears to the ultimate cognitive process. While conventional truth is necessarily a *worldly convention, mutually interdependent*, and that which *obstructs suchness*, Emptiness being the ultimate mode of existence of conventional phenomena is not a separate entity from its conventional nature. Nor is emptiness an absolute truth in the sense of being intrinsically real, for it too cannot withstand ultimate analysis. Thus, ultimate and conventional truths are two natures of the same phenomenon; they are coextensive and mutually entailing²⁵. However, it is not that conventional truth is empty of ultimate truth or that ultimate truth is empty of conventional truth. They are simply different isolates of the same phenomena. This then raises the problem of the 'emptiness of emptiness'. Emptiness of emptiness is the claim that while being the ultimate nature of all phenomena, emptiness itself is not ultimately real in the sense of being an absolute. Perhaps the misconceptions related to the

emptiness of emptiness arise because of the infinite regression that this claim entails, or perhaps it is our inability to distinguish the Two Truths from within their separate cognitive domains simultaneously²⁶ that leads scholars such as Mark Siderits to state "*the ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth*"²⁷.

Although mirages, reflections, and rope-snakes are alike in appearing to conventional cognitions, and they are alike in being empty of intrinsic essence, because they can be repudiated by another conventional cognition they are not posited as conventional truths. Although real snakes are false and deceptive because they do not exist as they appear, the conventional cognitive process does not understand them as false and deceptive. Because they fall within the scope of the valid framework within which language, concepts and logic operate Tsongkhapa posits them as truths for the world²⁸. A lack of intrinsic essence does not entail mere subjectivity, as coordination with its basis of imputation is a necessary condition for its establishment as conventionally true. Therefore, within the domain of the conventional, it is the epistemic authority of conventional cognitions that governs the distinction between truth and falsehood. While within the domain of the ultimate, it is the epistemic authority of ultimate cognitions that governs the truth *about* the conventional²⁹.

Now we move onto the third sense of *saṃvṛti* - *that which obscures the ultimately empty nature of things*. For Tsongkhapa, persons appear as though they exist by way of their own intrinsic essence. This obscures the fact that no such essence exists. Why? Because under critical analysis intrinsic essence is found to be non-existent. Because intrinsic essence is non-existent, persons do not exist inherently. Because persons do not exist inherently yet appear as if they do. Persons are found to not exist the way they appear. Thus, Tsongkhapa assert that because the appearance of intrinsic persons is false, consciousness is mistaken, even at the conventional level. Therefore, the appearance of intrinsic essence obscures the real nature of persons and hence it is in this sense that conventional truth is deceptive.

Although appearances of conventional persons are deceptive, Tsongkhapa maintains, it is possible for consciousness to be valid cognitions that posit false objects. Although Tsongkhapa posits these appearances as mistaken, there is no contradiction. This point can be illustrated by an example.

A mirage appears as water to an inexperienced traveler, yet it doesn't exist in the way that it appears. Many Mādhyamikas of the past such as Tsongkhapa and Candrakīrti have used examples such as the mirage or the illusions of a magician to illustrate the falsity of conventional truths. In *Lam rim chen mo* Tsongkhapa says:³⁰

Conventionally, we assert all phenomena are like a magician's illusion and are, therefore, false in conventional terms. Still, it is not contradictory to posit them as conventional truths (kun rdzob bden pa, saṃvṛti-satya). [Candrakīrti] Because ignorance obscures the nature of phenomena, we call it the concealer (kun rdzob, saṃvṛti). Hence there is no contradiction in something being true for the concealer, that is, ignorance, and false for the conventional consciousness (kun rdzob, saṃvṛti) with which we refute the intrinsic existence in phenomena.

Western Philosophers³¹ have also used the mirage example to illustrate the notion of truth for *the concealer*, that is, for conventional cognitions. However, if we were to take these examples literally the following problem would arise.

As Jay L. Garfield unwittingly says: “*A mirage appears to be water, but is in fact empty of water – it is deceptive, and in that sense, a false appearance. On the other hand, a mirage is not nothing; it is a real mirage, just not water*”³². How are we to understand the example of a mirage put forward to explain how conventional persons are both a false appearance yet a “truth”? For according to Tsongkhapa himself one of the criteria of a valid conventional phenomenon is that it must not be repudiated by another conventional cognition. While, it is clear that both a mirage and a magician's illusion can be repudiated and thus according to Tsongkhapa's own criteria for conventional truth these are in fact like a rope-snake, not conventionally true. A real rope can nonetheless perform the function of rope. On the other hand, rope-snakes cannot bite, mirages cannot quench thirst and illusory

elephants cannot trample crops. Being cognitive illusions they are not valid conventional phenomena. How is this a problem?

If one compares a mirage or a magical illusion to conventional truth, and cites such as an example of conventional truth, this leaves the relation between the false appearance of intrinsic essence and the underlying phenomenon's conventional functionality, broken. If we are to take the mirage example literally, then Candrakīrti, Tsongkhapa and Garfield are asserting that just like a mirage or a magician's illusion, conventional truths are without conventional functionality and hence they are not true, but rather completely false. This is because while the appearance of intrinsic water is a nonexistent and so cannot perform the function of water, conventionally existent water that is related to that appearance, does. However, the false appearance of a mirage as water has no relation to the conventional functionality of water. That is, the relation between the false appearance of water and its conventional function to quench thirst is broken. As Garfield himself says: "...a mirage is not nothing; it is a real mirage, just not water"³³. A mirage does not perform the function of quenching thirst rather; it functions to deceive inexperienced desert travelers. Thus, the relationship between the false appearance of a mirage as water, and water's conventional functionality to quench thirst, is broken. Surely Candrakīrti, Tsongkhapa and Garfield would be aware of this fact. So why posit such examples? Perhaps the answer lies in the pedagogical domain rather than the epistemic or ontological nature of conventional phenomena. Perhaps what we are being shown here is not that conventional truths are *like* a mirage, but rather like a mirage we can become thoroughly engaged in false appearances, believing them to be as they appear, intrinsically real, and then generating fear or desire and acting accordingly.

Despite the fact that ordinary beings apprehension of intrinsic persons is false and deceptive, the cognitive process, which posits persons, nonetheless certifies the basic entity of their objects of knowledge. Still, how can the certification of the

basic entity of persons, occur if persons cannot be found when searched for? One may ask: what is it that is being certified? The answer lies in the conceptual framework, an interdependent dynamic system of worldly conventions. What it means to be a person and all this entails, such as the ability to think and function as a person. It is the worldly conventions themselves that bootstrap this framework and it is the same framework that delineates what a person is, how a person functions, what it means to be a person. This interdependent dynamic system is both the certifier and the referee of the certification. In a sense the framework operates without ultimate analysis. It operates within the context of how given phenomena appear to it. Tsongkhapa calls these cognitions, non-analytical consciousness (dpyod med shes pa). Yet as he says: “*it is not the case that it is utterly non-inquisitive*”³⁴. This is because the conventional cognitive process operates within the context of how things appear or how they are known to a conventional consciousness (vyāvahārikajñāna, tha snyad pa'i shes pa). This process does not analyse to see if persons exist as they appear. In other words, conventional consciousness does not operate within the domain of ultimate analysis; rather conventional consciousness takes appearances on face value.

Although persons cannot be found under analysis, for ordinary people, the appearance of intrinsic persons does occur. These appearances are false because persons appear to possess essence, yet do not. They are deceptive because these false appearances obscure persons imputational nature. Moreover, because persons conventional functionality can be certified they can be said to exist truly, albeit, merely conventionally, for without truth in conventions, snakes could not bite, water could not quench thirst and persons could not read essays.

Conclusion

As a result of the wisdom arisen from understanding the two-fold illusory-like nature of persons, we can begin to eliminate the various levels of engrained psychological misconceptions about our world and ourselves. Thereby moving

progressively from an unenlightened to an enlightened experience. Tsongkhapa's Madhyamaka dialectic is effective in delivering this liberation because it is the epistemic authority of conventional cognitions, which leaves intact conventional functionality. While the epistemic authority of ultimate cognitions negating intrinsic essence, is the mechanism of the extirpation of the root cause of an unenlightened experience. Because persons are able to perform their worldly functions within the scope of that which accords with the conventions of the world yet do not possess one ounce of intrinsic essence, for Tsongkhapa, persons are illusory-like.

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NOTES

1 Superior being (Arya, 'phags pa) is a technical Buddhist term. It has also been translated as 'Noble being' and is an epithet for anyone who has the direct realization of emptiness. That is, anyone that has developed the direct perception of emptiness is called a 'superior being'.

2 The use of the word valid or validity in this paper has no relations to its use in formal logic. It is used here is meant to connote "correctness".

3 There are up to possible twelve different meanings of the term 'essence' or 'nature' found within Buddhist and non-Buddhist philosophical literature of India and Tibet. (1) nature that is the underlying principal of the universe; (2) nature that is one of the five principals that are involved in the workings of causality; (3) fundamental nature of the universe; an aspect of the god Krsna; (4) nature that is a person's uncommon character within their caste and qualities; (5) nature that allows things to arise causelessly; (6) a nature that is the basic principal of the universe, that is unmanifest and present in all phenomena; (7) nature in the context of the three-natures (ngo bo nyid gsum) of the Mind-Only school of Buddhism; (8) Fabricated nature; (9) A non-existent object-to-be-negated nature; (10) emptiness; a final nature that all phenomena possess; (11) a conventional nature; (12) an independent nature (rang bzhin gyi sku). For more on nature see Magee, W. 1999. *The Nature of Things: Emptiness and Essence in the Geluk World*. P.25-27.

4 Tsongkhapa. 2006. *Ocean of Reasoning: A Great Commentary on Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakārikā*. (N Samten and J Garfield, trans.). New York: Oxford University Press. P.372

5 Lam rim chen mo (byang chub lam gyi rim pa chen mo) translates as *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment* and was composed in the year 1402. Tsongkhapa composed this encyclopedic treatise as a means of presenting the entire path to enlightenment, from a spiritual aspirant's initial engagement through to Buddhahood. It has remained as relevant today as then, spawning hundreds of commentaries both in Tibetan and English. For a translation of this text see Tsongkhapa 2000-2004.

6 Tsongkhapa. (2002). *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*. Vol.3 (J Cutler, trans). Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications. P.279

7 Ibid p.279

8 "I believe that there is a necessary connection in both directions between the physical and the mental, but that it cannot be discovered a priori. Opinion is strongly divided on the credibility of some kind of functionalist reductionism, and I won't go through my reasons for being on the antireductionist side of that debate. Despite significant attempts by a number of philosophers to describe the functional manifestations of conscious mental states, I continue to believe that no purely functionalist characterization of a system entails—simply in virtue of our mental concepts—that the system is conscious". Nagel, "Conceiving the Impossible and the Mind-Body Problem" (1998), p. 337. Nagel's view clearly shows that even in the Western philosophical tradition there is still much debate over the nature of consciousness.

9 According to Jetsun Chogyi Gyeltsen *Presentation of Tenets*: Most of the eighteen sub-schools of the Great Exposition School (Vaibhashika) assert the mere collection of the psychophysical elements to be the person. However proponents from the Western region of the Great Exposition School (Vaibhashika) assert and mental consciousness to be the person, and the Kashmiris proponents of the Great Exposition School assert it is the continuum of the psychophysical elements. In the Sutra tenet system (Sautrantika) some assert the mental consciousness and others the continuum of the psychophysical elements to

be the person. The Mind-Only school (Chittamantra) False aspectarians assert the person to be the mere mental consciousness. While the True Aspectarians assert a foundational-consciousness or the Mind-basis-of-all (Alaya-vijana, kun gzhi rnam shes) to be the person. For the Svatantrika-Madhyamaka the person is the mental consciousness, and for Prāsaṅgika, as we have been shown in this essay, the person is the mere "I" imputed in dependence on the psychophysical elements.

10 Tsongkhapa, *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment. Vol.3* p.280

11 For Tsongkhapa not only is an intrinsic self nonexistent, so too are the psychophysical elements. For instance, if we were to take a part that is the basis of imputation of the self, such as the head, perceptions or conceptions and submit these to the same analysis, they too could not withstand this process. Accordingly, Tsongkhapa asserts: persons and phenomena are equally empty of intrinsic existence.

12 Ibid p.283

13 Ibid p.283-284

14 Tsongkhapa. 2006. *Ocean of Reasoning: A Great Commentary on Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakārikā*. P.483

15 Ibid p.483

16 Jinpa, T. 2002. *Self, Reality and Reasons in Tibetan Philosophy: Tsongkhapa's Quest for the Middle Way*. New York: Routledge Curzon p.151

17 Ibid p.152

18 Hopkins. 2008. *Tsong-Kha-Pa's Final Exposition of Wisdom*. Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications p.109

19 Nagel, T 1997. *The Last Word*. New York: Oxford University Press 1997, p.15.

20 Jinpa. *Self, Reality and Reasoning in Tibetan Philosophy* p. 156

21 Jinpa. *Self, Reality and Reasoning in Tibetan Philosophy* p. 156

22 Hopkins. *Meditation on Emptiness* p.542

23 Tsongkhapa. *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment. Vol.3* p.180

24 For on this see Hopkins 2003. *Maps of the Profound: Jam-yang-shay-ba's Great Exposition of Buddhist and Non-Buddhist Views on the Nature of Reality*. Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications. P.896

25 Thakchoe S 2007 *Status of Conventional Truth in Tsongkhapa's Madhyamaka Philosophy*, *Contemporary Buddhism*, 8:1 p.31

26 This is something that enlightened beings are capable of doing but for non Buddhas, it is one or the other.

27 Siderits, M. 2003. "On the Soteriological Significance of Emptiness". *Contemporary Buddhism* Vol. 4 No. 1, 2003. P.11

28 Tsongkhapa. *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment. Vol.3* p.174

29 Garfield. 2008. "Taking Conventional Truth Seriously: Authority Regarding Deceptive Reality". p.4

30 Tsong khapa. *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment. Vol.3* p.175

31 Garfield. 2008. "Taking Conventional Truth Seriously: Authority Regarding Deceptive Reality".

32 Garfield. 2008. "*Taking Conventional Truth Seriously: Authority Regarding Deceptive Reality*". p.3

33 Ibid p.3

34 Tsongkhapa. *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment. Vol.3* p.178-179