

# MĀDHYAMAKA THROUGH METAPHORS

An attempt to capture and convey the journey, intricacies, and experiences of cultivating the profound Madhyamaka View through metaphors.

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# TRAPPINGS OF SAMSARA

And the Path to Freedom from Samsara

## THE EXTREME OF BONDAGE

- Individual sufferings
- Common sufferings
- Physical pains
- Mental agonies
- Ravages of afflictions
- Restraining grip of self-grasping



# BONDAGE IN OPERATION

Swept away by the currents of the four  
powerful rivers,  
Tied by the strong bonds of karma, so  
hard to escape,  
Ensnared by the iron net of self-grasping,  
Engulfed in a dark mist of ignorance,  
Tormented without end by three kinds of  
suffering,  
Through endless cycles of samsaric  
existence,  
**Thus is my condition in samsara –**  
Reflect upon this and generate the mind  
seeking freedom.



# DETERMINATION TO BE FREE

An ever-present **aspiration** for **freedom** from the captivity of afflictions,  
**based on** a deep-seated **disillusionment**  
**with** the lures of **samsara**.




# WHY DETERMINATION?

**Without determination, clinging to the lures of samsara cannot be quelled.**

**With clinging to them kept intact, one will remain completely bound to sufferings.**



## WHY NOW?

A close-up photograph of a human hand reaching out towards a bright, shimmering body of water under a clear sky. The hand is in the foreground, with fingers slightly spread, and the background is a vast expanse of water with many bright, shimmering reflections of light, creating a bokeh effect. The sky is a clear, pale blue.

We have this **life of ease and fortune**, with immense potential

It is **hard to find** another like this

It can be **lost anytime**

# CULTIVATING DETERMINATION

- The **great yet rare opportunity** this **precious life** presents
- The fact of **impermanence** and **death**
- **Karma** and its veritable nature
- The **sufferings** of cyclic existence





# CRAVING AND GRASPING

## Feeling as the object of craving

- **Pleasant** feeling
- **Unpleasant** feeling
- **Neutral** feelings



**Increased craving is grasping** characterized by **agony**

# STEPS TO FREEDOM

- The training of **wisdom**
- The training of **concentration**
- The training of **morality**



# COMPLACENCY IN NIRVANA

And the Path to Freedom from Self-Centered Thought

# THE EXTREME OF PERSONAL SERENITY

- **Content with** mere freedom for **individual well-being**
  - **Meditatively absorbed** in the peace of personal freedom
  - **Lacking** in active **commitment to** the well-being of **others**
- While** fellow **sentient beings** continue to **suffer**



## “JUST LIKE ME”

Swept away by the currents of the four  
powerful rivers,  
Tied by the strong bonds of karma, so  
hard to escape,  
Ensnared by the iron net of self-grasping,  
Engulfed in a dark mist of ignorance,  
Tormented without end by three kinds of  
suffering,  
Through endless cycles of samsaric  
existence,  
**Thus is the condition of all our kind  
mothers –**  
Reflect upon this and generate the mind  
of supreme awakening.



# CONTEMPLATING THE KINDNESS OF OTHERS

- As close beings
- As neutrals
- As enemies





## ASPIRING TO FREE OTHERS

- Affinity
- Empathy
- Endearing Love
- Compassion and Loving Kindness
- Special Resolve
- Bodhicitta (aspirational)

# DETERMINING TO FREE OTHERS

- Increased **aspirational bodhicitta**
- Summoning up the courage to **engage in the practice**
- Committing to the practice of **bodhisattvas**—taking **vow**
- The **six paramitas**, especially the wisdom paramita

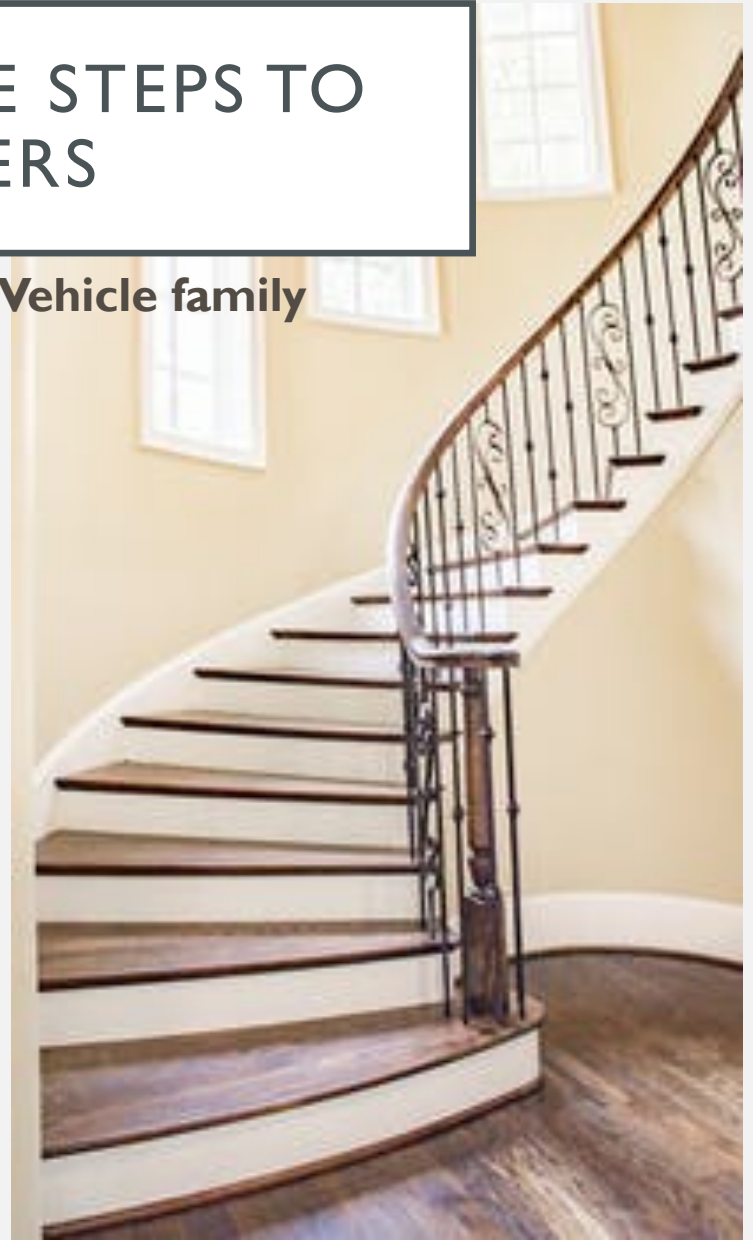




# ACTUALIZING THE STEPS TO FREE OTHERS

for those belonging to the **Great Vehicle** family

- Great compassion
- Great resolve
- Aspirational bodhicitta
- Engaged bodhicitta together with bodhisattva vow
- Six paramitas with special emphasis on Wisdom
- Śamatha
- Vipashyana
- The union of the two
- The Path of Seeing onwards



## SEVEN-FOLD CAUSE AND EFFECT

- All sentient beings have been your **mother countless times**.
- Recalling their **kindness**
- Wishing to **repay** their kindness
- Having seen them kind in so many ways, you develop **endearing love** towards them.
- With that as the basis, you see them suffering then **you develop compassion** and seeing them lacking joy, you **wish them joy**
- Then you develop **special resolve**
- **Aspiration** for full Buddhahood



## EQUALIZING & EXCHANGING SELF FOR OTHERS

- Seeing oneself and others as equal
- Seeing pitfalls of self-cherishing
- Seeing the benefits of cherishing others
- Exchanging self and others
- Taking the sufferings of others
- Giving your positive results and causes
- Bodhicitta



WISDOM UNDERSTANDING  
SELFLESSNESS

# WISDOM UNDERSTANDING SELFLESSNESS

- Realizing **both** determination to be free and the determination to free others **depend on the wisdom of emptiness**
- Freeing ourselves requires cultivating the wisdom of understanding selflessness in a **limited, succinct way**
- Freeing others requires cultivating the wisdom of understanding selflessness in an elaborate, **all-rounded way**





WHAT WOULD IT BE LIKE  
WITHOUT WISDOM?

## CONCEIVING INHERENT EXISTENCE WE EXPERIENCE AFFLICTIONS

Like living in the midst of a snakes' nest, we cannot avoid encountering snakes sooner or later, one way or the other.



## AFFLICTIONS – SENSES ANALOGY

- **Self-grasping attitude** is like the sense of **touch**
- The **rest of the afflictions** are like the **remaining senses**





# WHAT IS A MĀDHYAMAKA VIEW?

- Arriving at an **understanding** about the mode of existence of all **phenomena** as **free from** the two extremes of **‘inherent existence’** and **‘not existing at all.’**
- Seeing **emptiness** as **reinforcing dependent origination**; seeing **dependent origination** as **reinforcing emptiness**
- Succeeding in **exhaustively refuting any intrinsic nature** while comfortably **upholding all conventional realities.**

WESTERN PHYSICIANS ON  
TRANSMUNDANE IMPLICATIONS

# CONSCIOUSNESS

“[T]he problem of consciousness in science... Right now in science, thankfully, there are some scientists like myself who are interested in trying to pursue the answers, as the answers don't yet exist.”

“[T]here is enough evidence that warrants a large scale study.”

– *Dr. Sam Parnia, a Fellow in Pulmonary and Critical Care Medicine at the Weill Cornell Medical Center in New York*

# CONSCIOUSNESS

“Our assumptions that human mind, consciousness, and the brain are the same thing, work for the majority of cases. In the same way now-a-days, if we use Newtonian Physics for most things on planet Earth that we’re involved with, that’s fine. We don’t have to apply quantum laws. They work fine. It’s only when you go to that extreme that those laws no longer hold.”

– *Dr. Sam Parnia, a Fellow in Pulmonary and Critical Care Medicine at the Weill Cornell Medical Center in New York*

# CONSCIOUSNESS

“Therefore it may be that we are on the verge of discovering a whole new science. A science that helps us to understand what the human mind and consciousness is, in the same way that in the twentieth century we had to come out with a whole new branch of physic that explained things in those extremes, at the sub-atomic level.”

– *Dr. Sam Parnia, a Fellow in Pulmonary and Critical Care Medicine at the Weill Cornell Medical Center in New York*

# NEAR DEATH EXPERIENCES

“Your crash cart wasn’t plugged in. When I was floating on the ceiling, I looked down and I saw that it wasn’t plugged in at all and that’s why you guys were having trouble getting it to work.”

“And then I was back.”

“What do you mean you were back?”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to figure out.”

“That was weird. You guys sucked me back into my body.”

– quotations collected by Dr. Melvin Morse, MD, critical care physician, Seattle Children’s Hospital

# REBIRTH

“There can be something that survives after the death of the brain and the death of the body that is somehow connected to a new child. I have become convinced that there is more to the world than the physical universe.

There’s the mind piece, which is its own entity.”

– Jim Tucker, MD, *child psychiatrist and Associate Professor of Psychiatry and Neurobehavioral Sciences at the University of Virginia School of Medicine.*

# REBIRTH

“I think at this point it’s enough for us to be humble and say, we don’t have all the answers we thought we did and that the world is much more bizarre than we can even imagine.”

– *Dr. Bruce Greyson, MD, Professor Emeritus of Psychiatry and Neurobehavioral Sciences at the University of Virginia*



# REBIRTH

“Why a person appears to be reborn in one family rather than another interests me passionately. It's a question for the next century.”

*– Ian Stevenson, MD (1918 - 2007) Psychiatrist, director of the Division of Perceptual Studies at the University of Virginia School of Medicine 1957-2007*

CONFLICTING VIEWS ON  
ULTIMATE STATUS

# EVERYTHING HAS AN ABSOLUTE BASE



Essentialism

Reductionism

Atomism

# EVERYTHING IS MERELY MENTAL PROJECTIONS



Nothing has external reality

Idealism

# EVERYTHING IS PART PROJECTION, PART OBJECTIVE



Partial emptiness

Autonomous Syllogism wielders

# EVERYTHING IS MERE DESIGNATION



- Nothing exists in and of itself  
Emptiness school  
*Reductio ad Absurdum* wielders

## MAKING SENSE OF CONFLICTING VIEWS ON ULTIMATE STATUS

- Helps us **start from where we are** and then advance gradually
- Helps us **identify ways we might stray** from the path of right understanding
- Helps us **avoid becoming stuck** in wrong or partial understanding of the true nature of emptiness
- Gives us greater **appreciation of the profundity** of the ultimate standpoint
- **Safely preparing us** for the task of developing a non-conceptual, direct realization



SKILLFUL MEANS  
LEADING TO SUBTLE  
UNDERSTANDING

- “existence, non-existence, and both...”
- “begin with that which delights them...”
- “just as strangers cannot be communicated with...”



## SOURCE OF OBJECTIONS AND ALLEGATIONS

Not knowing:

- The **purpose** of teaching emptiness
- The **nature** of its experience
- The **meaning** of emptiness



WHAT DO THEIR OBJECTIONS  
LOOK LIKE?



BENEFITS OF PURSUING A  
MĀDHYAMAKA  
UNDERSTANDING

## SEEING THE PATH



- It provides one with the eyes that **see the heart of the path**, for both individual liberation seekers and full-enlightenment seekers

# MERIT ACCUMULATION



- Accumulates all types of merits, both mundane and super-mundane. Even when pursued with doubt.

# GREAT MERIT



- Merit accumulated on this alone far exceeds those reaped from the rest of the far-reaching practices

# PROTECTION



- Protects one from entering the lower realms even when one is bogged down by the ten non-virtuous actions

## REPELS KARMIC BURDEN



- Repels the karmic-obstruction layer off of the boundless misdeeds and the act of abandoning dharma.



# TENDENCIES TO WATCH OUT FOR

When encountering the topic of  
emptiness

# NO INTEREST

- Total lack of interest and even shuns it



## SIMPLISTIC ENTHUSIASM

- Enthused over it, though settling for a more simplistic and nihilistic position

### 9. THE STORY OF JOHNNY HEAD-IN-AIR.



As he trudg'd along to school,  
It was always Johnny's rule  
To be looking at the sky  
And the clouds that floated by;  
But what just before him lay,  
In his way,  
Johnny never thought about;  
So that every one cried out —  
"Look at little Johnny there,  
Little Johnny Head-In-Air!"

Running just in Johnny's way,  
Came a little dog one day;  
Johnny's eyes were still astray  
Up on high,  
In the sky;  
And he never heard them cry —  
"Johnny, mind, the dog is nigh!"  
Bump!  
Dump!  
Down they fell, with such a thump,  
Dog and Johnny in a lump!

# CONDITIONS RECOMMENDED

For laying a firm ground for  
such an understanding

# CONDITIONS FOR A SOUND UNDERSTANDING

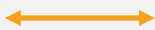



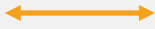
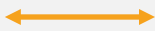
- pure **ethical conduct**
- relying on an **authentic spiritual mentor**
- **purifying** defilements
- **accumulating** merit and wisdom
- following **definitive scriptures**
- using the **guidance of great sages** as Nagarjuna, Aryadeva, Buddhapalita, and Chandrakirti
- **study, reflect, and meditate** on emptiness.



# IMPORTANT DISTINCTIONS

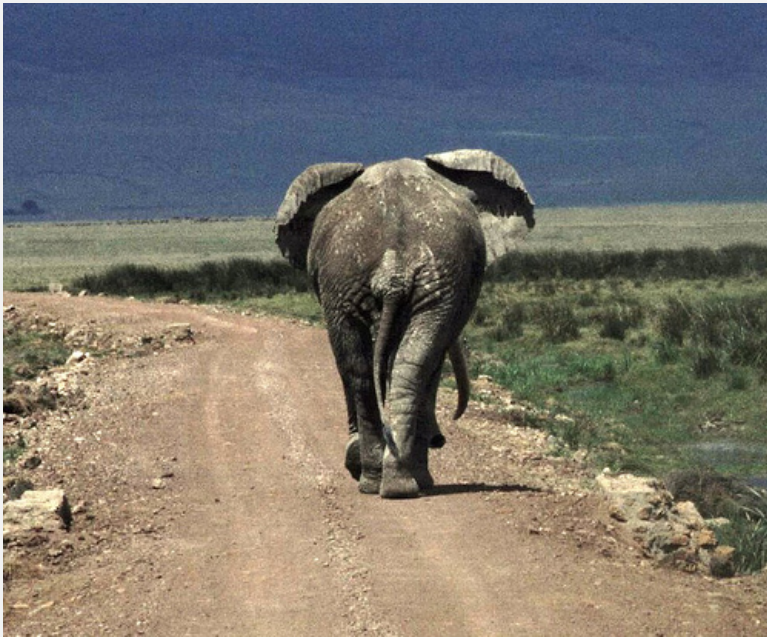
To be made in arriving at an  
unmistaken understanding

# IMPORTANT DISTINCTIONS

- Two types of existences  • Two types of non-existences
- Existence by way of convention  • Existence merely in the face of delusion
- Centrism free from the two extremes  • Any position free even from the stance of that Centrality
- A mind not engaged with the two (projected) selfhoods  • A mind engaged with the two selflessness
- That something is unfindable by a ultimate consciousness  • That something is negated by an ultimate consciousness
- That something does not withstand ultimate analysis  • That something is harmed by ultimate analysis

# IDENTIFYING THE ANTIDOTE

**Would the knowledge of elephant's absence dispel the danger of a snake strike?**





# IDENTIFYING IGNORANCE

**Correctly identifying the ignorance is crucial**



- Making all out efforts while failing to identify the object of negation is like shooting arrows without seeing the target.

# ALTERING THE GROUND REALITY?

**Does cultivating the wisdom of emptiness entail altering the ground reality at all?**

- No addition
- No deletion
- It only enables one to see the fundamental reality as it is.



# STATUS OF PHENOMENA

- It has parts in respect to which it is the whole;
- It is not identifiable with any of the parts, nor the collection of those parts;
- Nor is it findable outside of the parts and the collection thereof;
- It is imputed not **on** the parts, nor on the collection thereof;
- It is imputed **in dependence upon** the parts or the collection thereof.

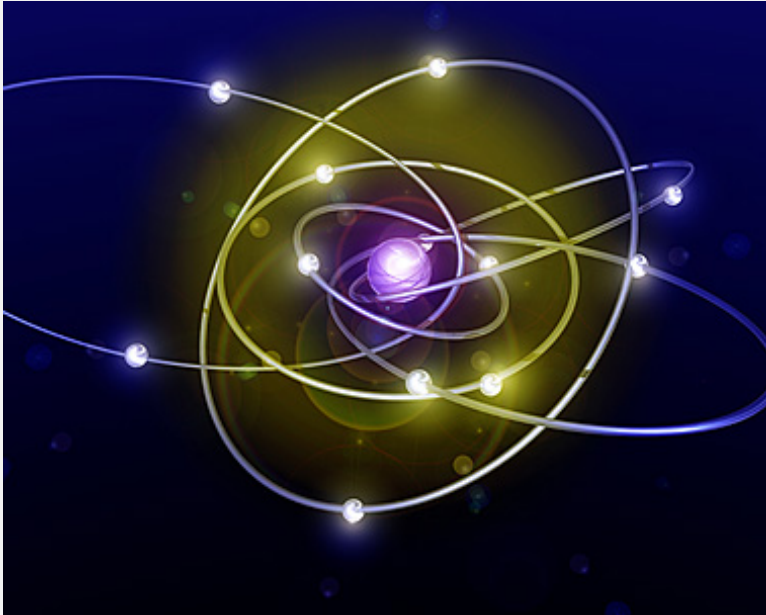
# WHAT IS THE SLEIGH?



- horses?
- cart?
- runners?
- straps?
- People in it?
- Parts collectively?
- Shape(s) of the parts or of the collective?
- Outside of them?

# NOTHING CAN WITHSTAND ULTIMATE ANALYSIS ...

**... beyond mere conventionality**



- Just as a horn on a rabbit's head is un-findable,
- Every phenomenon is not findable upon analysis beyond convention;
- Not even a bull's horn is exception. Go ahead and search for it in the midst of its sub-atomic particles and beyond.

# THE BALANCING ACT

## Avoiding the two extremes of absolutism and nihilism

- Hurting the cub with its jaws by over-tightening its grip is likened to hurting ourselves by holding on to absolutes;
- Losing the cub by dropping it on the ground is likened to failing in our virtuous efforts by undermining conventional reality.





## A CLOSE-UP ON THE MEANING OF 'EXTREME'

- When we fall into extremes, we sustain considerable damage
- Not just about the terms 'existence' and 'non-existence'
- One would hold the awkward position of neither existence nor non-existence, and seek to re-arrange the wordings of texts like the Heart Sutra.

SELF-GRASPING



# THAT SELF-GRASPING ATTITUDE

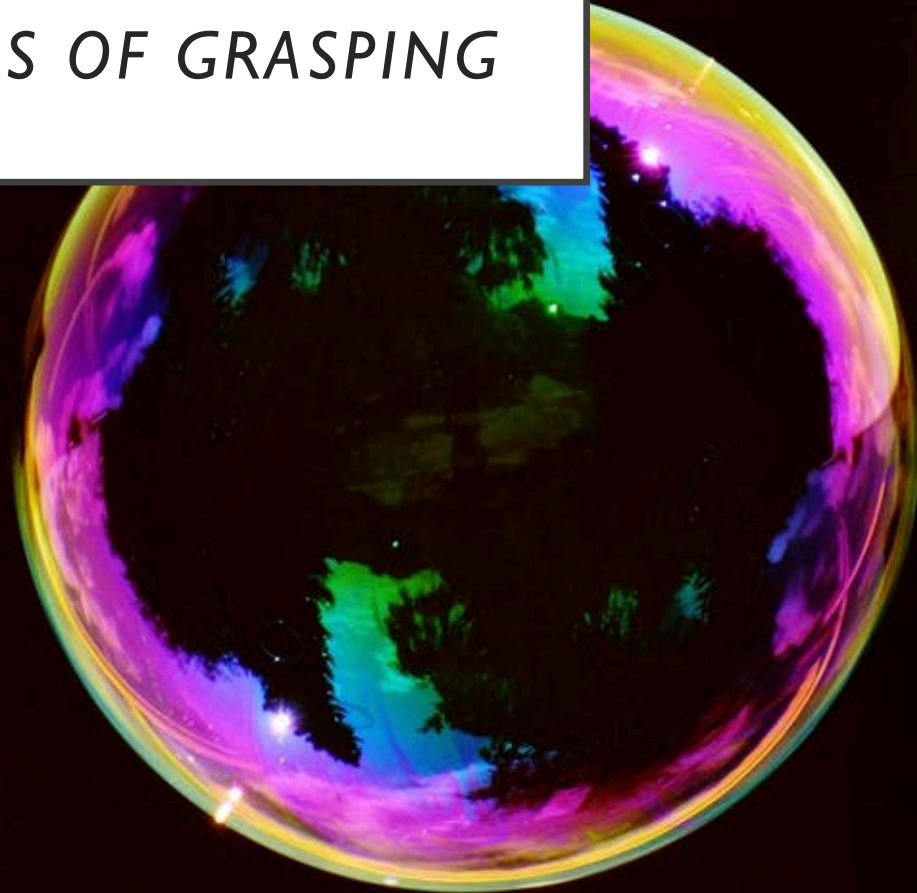
**Identifying the self-grasping attitude in oneself is the whole purpose**

- Or else, it would be like looking for the footprints of the culprit on the lawn while he escapes safely into the forest.



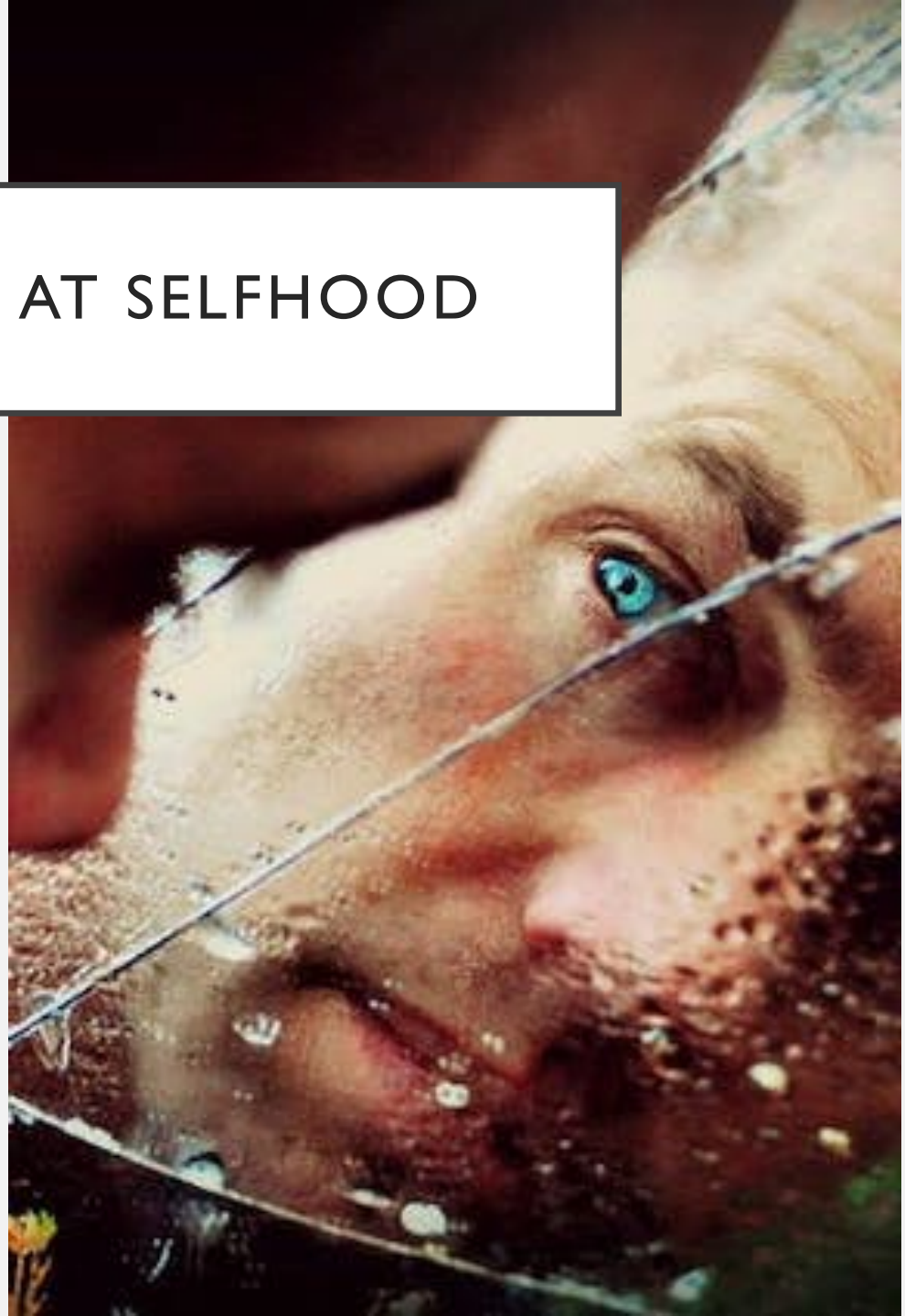
## TWO CATEGORIES OF GRASPING

- *Atmagraha* - grasping at an inherent selfhood/identity of a person
- *Dharmagraha* - grasping at an inherent selfhood/identity of a phenomenon



## GRASPING AT SELFHOOD

- **Atmagraha** (grasping at an inherent selfhood/identity of a person)
- **Satkagadristi** (view of the transitory collection—grasping at an inherent selfhood/identity of oneself)
- Sub-division of Satkagadristi into two:
  - conception of an inherent ‘I’
  - an inherent ‘mine’



EMPTY?

# THE PARADOX OF ROPE/SNAKE



No difference, whatsoever, in terms of the measure of imputation;

A world of difference whether or not there is actual a snake as imputed;

A world of difference whether or not they are capable of performing the functions;

Difference in which imputation is upheld conventionally;

Difference in which imputation faces objection.

# THE PARADOX OF ROPE/SNAKE



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Difference in which imputation is upheld conventionally;

Difference in which imputation faces objection.



Moon in water



Dream



Mirage



Magical illusion

EIGHT EXAMPLES  
ILLUSTRATING THE  
ILLUSORY NATURE  
OF PHENOMENA



Reflection in mirror



Rainbow



Visual distortion

# GENERAL MISTAKES

- Too **broad** an object of negation
- Too **narrow** an object of negation
- **Partial** emptiness
- Mentally **fabricated** emptiness
- **Unsuitable** to be understood
- The understanding **brings no benefit.**





# THREE DIMENSIONS OF DEPENDENT ORIGINATION

- Dependent causation



# THREE DIMENSIONS OF DEPENDENT ORIGINATION

- Dependent constitution



## THREE DIMENSIONS OF DEPENDENT ORIGINATION

- Dependent designation



# “EMPTINESS” MEANS “DEPENDENT ARISING”

‘Meaning’ in what sense?

- regular definition
- expressed meaning
- implicitly conveyed



## SOME POINTS OF CLARIFICATION ABOUT EMPTINESS

- It is **not** some kind of an **absolute** strata of reality that underlies our illusory world
- It is **not** something like a **core reality**, lying somehow at the heart of the universe
- It does **not exist separately** and independently of particular phenomena
- It exists **only as a quality** of a particular phenomenon
- Though not a product of causes and conditions, the **emptiness** of a phenomenon **ceases** to exist **when** that **phenomenon ceases** to exist.



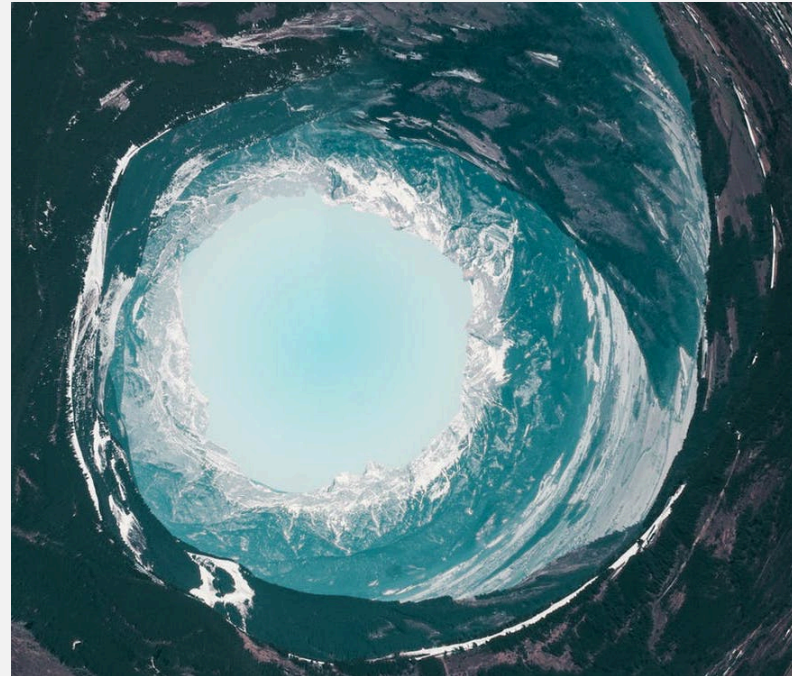
## SOUND UNDERSTANDING OF EMPTINESS

- Does **not conflict with** the workings of **causality**
- Sees **causality possible only** in the light of **non-inherent** existence;
- Every phenomenon to be **existing by the force of others** (i.e. conventions), not by its own power;
- Whenever we relate to any phenomenon in our ordinary life, we do so by **not searching** for it **beyond the convention.**

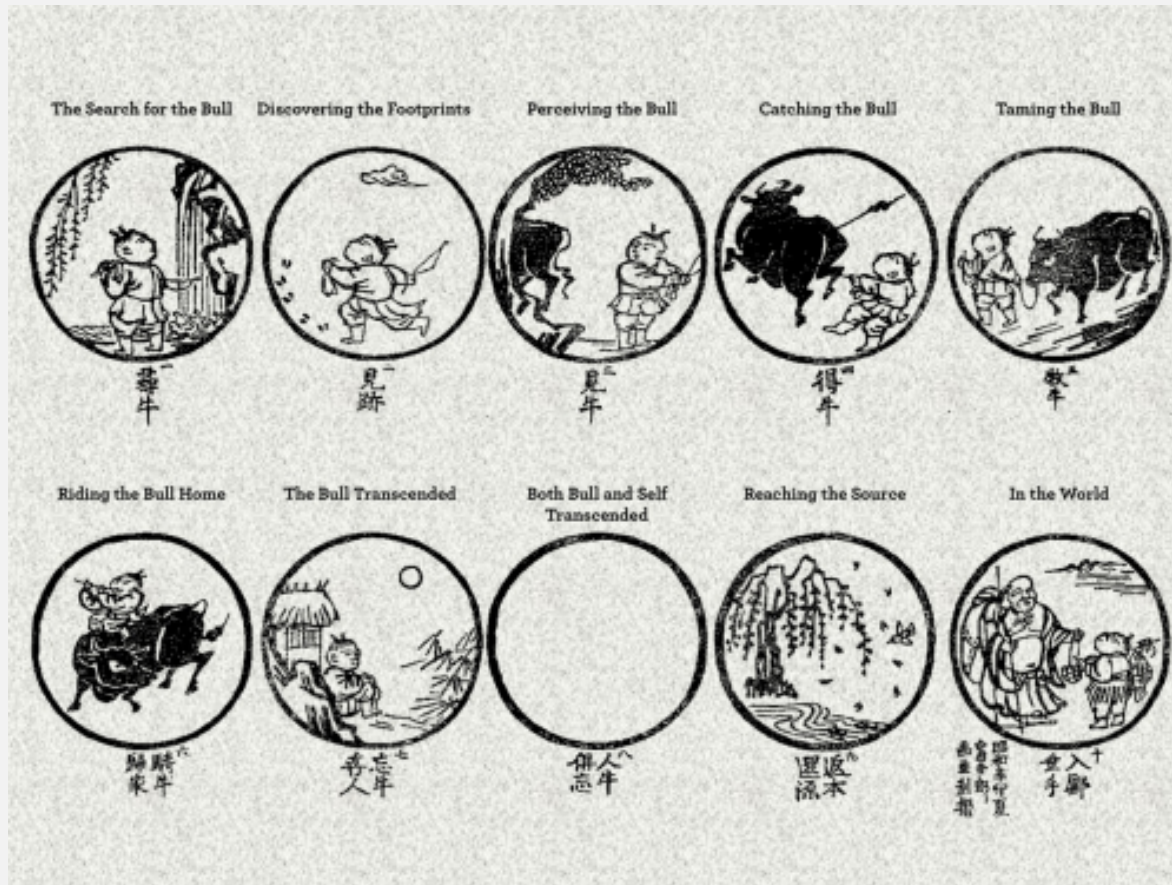


# THE FOURFOLD/SIX-FOLD EMPTINESS

- Form is emptiness,
- Emptiness is form;
- Emptiness is not other than form,
- Form is not other than emptiness;
- Whatever is form is itself the emptiness,
- Whatever is emptiness it itself the form.



# TEN OX-HERDING PICTURES





# CHÖGYAM TRUNGPA RINPOCHE'S TAKE



## SYNONYMS OF THE OBJECT OF NEGATION

- True existence
- Ultimate existence
- Perfect existence
- Inherent existence
- Self-characterized existence
- Intrinsic existence
- Independent existence\*



# SYNONYMS OF EMPTINESS

- Ultimate Object
- Ultimate Truth
- Reality/Actuality
- Suchness/Thusness
- Fundamental Nature



# FEATURES OF EMPTINESS

**As experienced by ordinary beings**

**Effect:**

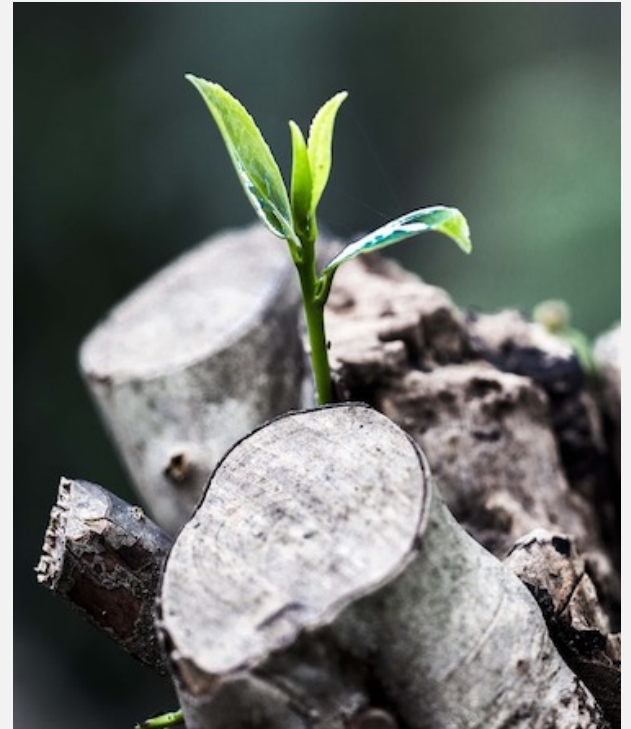
**Not inherently one with its cause,**

**Not inherently separate from its cause;**

**Cause:**

**Not extending into the effect**

**Not abruptly ceasing upon the effect**



# FEATURES OF EMPTINESS

## Features of emptiness as experienced by Arya beings

- Unteachable
- Inexpressible
- Inconceivable
- Peaceful
- Inseparable



# INEFFABLE AND INCOMPREHENSIBLE

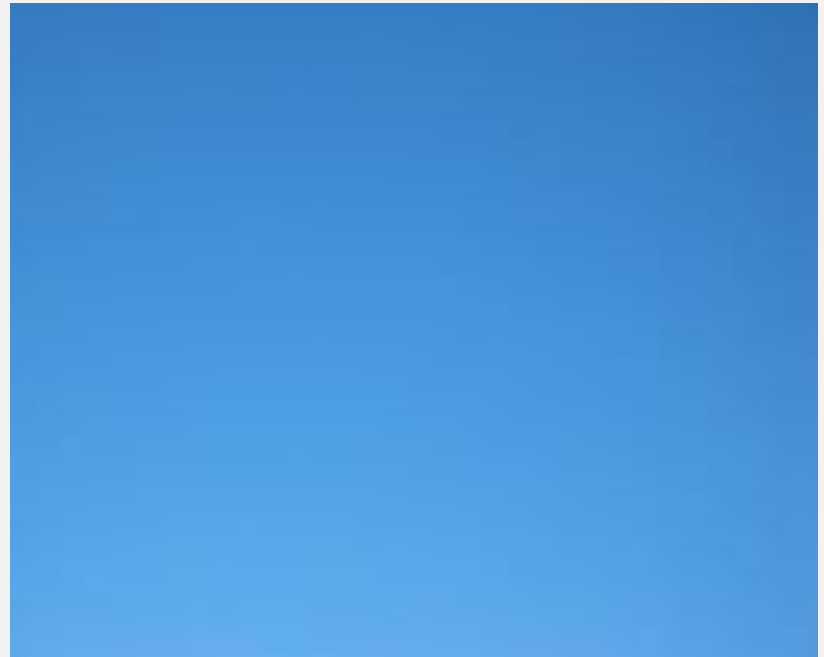
- **Inexpressible** as experienced by the untainted
- **Incomprehensible** as experienced by the untainted
- The experience of the untainted is in **accord with the reality**



# MEDITATIVE EQUIPOISE INTO EMPTINESS

What might the experience be like?

The experience is called  
the **Space-like emptiness**  
of the equipoise



# POST-MEDITATIVE WISDOM OF EMPTINESS

**What might that experience be like?**



The experience is called the  
**Magical-illusion-like emptiness**  
of the post-equipoise



# THE TRANSCENDED WISDOM OF THE BUDDHA

## What might that experience be like?

- **Sees both** the empty nature and variety nature **simultaneously** yet discreetly
- **Each is unaffected by the other;** although the two experiences are inextricably blended
- **Seeing** one occurs **within** the **framework of not seeing the other**, yet seeing them simultaneously



# PERFECTION OF WISDOMS SUTRAS

- The Prajñāparamita sutra in hundred thousand (verses)
- The Prajñāparamita sutra in twenty thousand (verses)
- The Prajñāparamita sutra in eight thousand (verses)
- The Diamond Sutra --- three hundred verses
- The Heart of Wisdom Sutra --- twenty-five verses
- The One Letter Prajñāparamita Sutra ...



QUOTES FROM WESTERN  
PHILOSOPHERS AND  
PHYSICISTS

# THE GESTALT PRINCIPLE

“The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.”

In viewing the whole, a cognitive process takes place—the mind makes a leap from comprehending the parts to realizing the whole.

— advocated by theorists Max Wertheimer, Wolfgang Kohler, and Kure Koffka.

# THINKING

“A great many people think they are thinking when they are merely rearranging their prejudices.”

— attributed to William James

# PARADOX

“How wonderful that we have met with a paradox. Now we have some hope of making progress.”

— as quoted in *Niels Bohr: The Man, His Science, & the World They Changed* (1966) by Ruth Moore, p. 196

## ENCOUNTERING NEW THEORY

“Those who are not shocked when they first come across quantum theory cannot possibly have understood it.”

— As quoted in *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007) by Karen Michelle Barad, p. 254, with a footnote citing *The Philosophical Writings of Niels Bohr* (1998).

# REALITY

“Everything we call real is made of things that cannot be regarded as real.”

— attributed to Niels Bohr