[INTRODUCTION]

1. The Reason Why It Is Correct to Seek Out Reality (de kho na nyid)

Beings who strive to liberate themselves from *saṃsāra* should first properly determine what reality, that is, selflessness (*bdag med pa*), is like, and then above all things, exert themselves in meditation on the wisdom that realizes selflessness. Should [that wisdom] be lacking, it reduces one to being like the heterodox, who possess in great quantities extremely stable, clear and nonconceptual *samādhis* that are devoid of agitation and mental dullness, together with all of the magical powers and the forms of extrasensory perception based on those [*samādhis*]. Therefore, these accomplishments alone cannot make the least impact on the root of *saṃsāra*. For this reason, the Lord of Sages, Kamalaśīla, says in his first *Bhāvanākrama:*

> Thus, having put the mind firmly on the object, analyze it with wisdom. Because when the light of wisdom is born in this way, the seeds of the afflictions (*nyon mongs*) will be eliminated. Otherwise, mere *samādhi,* like that of the heterodox, will not eliminate these afflictions, for as it says in the *sūtras*, "Even though worldly beings open the door to *samādhi,* they do not destroy the perception of the self; and because of their afflictions, they remain in utter turmoil. Such was the case, for example, with Udraka's *samādhi.*"[14]

Well then, what method *does* free one from *saṃsāra,* you might ask. The [7]
passage that follows in the *sūtra* quoted in the *Bhāvanākrama,* says: "If one understands the lack of self in phenomena, if one analyzes it and does meditation on it, this will be the cause of the result, the attainment of *nirvāṇa.* No cause other than that will pacify [the afflictions]."[15] By accustoming oneself to the wisdom that is the understanding of selflessness, one will become liberated from *saṃsāra,* because the root that binds one to *saṃsāra* is the misapprehension of the self (*bdag 'dzin*).

Therefore, because every last bit of the Conqueror's scriptures are only directed at reality (*de bzhin nyid*), and only point to reality, one should not be satisfied merely with *samādhi,* but, having searched for the wisdom that is the

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understanding of reality, one should exert oneself in single-pointed meditation [on it]. That is why in the second *Bhāvanākrama* it also says:

> All of the Buddha's words are well spoken, and because they are derived from his direct experience (*mngon sum*), they clarify reality [for us], they immerse us in reality. If one understands reality, one will become free of the net of all views (*lta ba*), just as darkness is dispelled when light arises. One cannot attain pure wisdom simply by means of *śamatha*, nor can it eliminate the darkness of the obscurations (*sgrib pa*). When wisdom (*shes rab*) correctly meditates on reality, it transforms into perfectly pure gnosis (*ye shes*), it will realize reality. It is by means of wisdom that one eliminates the obscurations. Therefore, think to yourself, "I will abide in *śamatha* and will strive [8]
> by means of wisdom toward reality. I will not be satisfied only with *śamatha*." And what, you may ask, is reality? It is emptiness, that is, that ultimately all things, both persons and phenomena, [are devoid] of self.[16]

Not only is it [the cause of obtaining *nirvāṇa*], but the principle path for attaining omniscience itself is this very wisdom that understands reality, for the other [perfections], giving and so on, are as if blind when not steeped in wisdom, and [hence wisdom] is said to be like a guide to the blind. The *Vajracchedikā* says:

> When a man who has eyes enters the darkness, he does not see a thing. Likewise should one consider a bodhisattva who engages in giving, having fallen into eternalism. It is like this, Subhūti, at daybreak, when the sun rises, men who have eyes see the various aspects of physical things. Likewise should one consider any bodhisattva who engages in giving without falling into eternalism.[17]

Also, as the *Āryasaṃcayagāthā* says: "The trillions of blind men cannot, without a guide, even find the road, much less enter the city. Devoid of the guide of wisdom, the [other] five perfections, without eyes, cannot reach enlightenment."[18] This has been a very brief treatment [of this subject].

[The Emptiness Taught in the Tantras][19]

Not only is this so within the vehicle of the perfections of the Mahāyāna, but even in the Vajrayāna, the reality on which beings are to meditate conjoined with the endless specialties of methods [particular to the *tantras*] is none other than the emptiness set forth in the Madhyamaka logical compendia (*dBu ma rigs pa'i tshogs*).[20] There is no special [kind of emptiness in the *tantras*] apart [9]
from this [one taught in the Madhyamaka]. Hence, the reality that is to be

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meditated on by everyone in all three vehicles—both [the two divisions of the] greater and the lesser—is only of one [kind]. Though there are many scriptural passages from such *tantras* as the glorious *Guhyasamāja* and from the Mahāsiddhas's [works] that substantiate this, as it would lengthen [my work] and as this is not the appropriate place for [such a discussion], I will not expand on it.

[Opponent:] But is not the intention of the *Kālacakra Tantra*[21] different, for in the "Brief Topic" (*mdor bstan*) "Explanation of What We Ourselves Believe"[22] it says: "The emptiness which analyzes the aggregates (*phung po*), like a plantain, has no core."[23] Does this not suggest that emptiness arrived at through logical analysis is without a core, [that is, is pointless]?[24]

[Reply:] The meaning of this scripture is as follows. It is not referring to the object that is arrived at through analysis. It is instead refuting a nihilistic kind of emptiness (*chad stong*) which is a blank mindedness that results through the [incorrect] analysis of the aggregates, without [as is correct] setting forth the aggregates as truthless (*bden med*) through the negation [of truth and not of existence in general]. That is why the great commentary, the *Vimalaprabhā* says: "The emptiness which is the end product of analyzing the aggregates is a far cry from a nihilistic [kind of] emptiness."[25]

[This position that the emptiness as taught in the *Kālacakra Tantra* is different from that taught in the Madhyamaka sources] is also in contradiction to the seventh "Brief Topic" of the second chapter [of the *Vimalaprabhā*], where it states that a Mādhyamika should understand reality by determining the consciousness aggregate to be devoid of an essence (*rang bzhin*) by means of the reasoning that proves it to be neither one nor many, and by means of such examples as the sky flower. Moreover, in the "Brief Topic" concerning "The Insuperable"[26] in the section dedicated to the refutation [of the claim] that nothing whatsover coming to mind is meditation on reality, it says that the gnosis of the Tathāgata is the realization that all phenomena lack inherent existence; that it is not a mind which has fallen into a deep sleep, the characteristic [of the mind that thinks of] nothing. Thus, it explains the reality of all phenomena to be the lack of inherent existence. [10]

In the second chapter it says: "The multitude of beings who are confused by illusion are seized by one suffering after another."[27] And in the *Commentary,* it says: "They are seized by one suffering after another, such as those of the hell beings, *pretas,* and animals, and this [is because] they are confused by the illusions of *saṃsāra.* They are confused in the sense of their grasping to 'I' and 'mine'."[28] Because it explains that the grasping of "I" and "mine" is the root of the suffering of *saṃsāra,* [it implies] its acceptance that the antidote that cuts the root of *saṃsāra* is the wisdom which realizes selflessness. Thus, one should understand that [the philosophy of the *tantras*] is not in the least inconsistent with the Madhyamaka of the perfections. That is why the second chapter of the *Great Commentary* [the *Vimalaprabhā*] says: "Thus the effect

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does not arise from itself, from something else, from both, nor is it causeless."[29] Such passages as these teach the reasoning that refutes the four extremes. It goes on to say that this can be understood more extensively by studying the vast scriptures, such as those of the Madhyamaka.[30]

[Opponent:] But doesn't this *tantra* [the *Kālacakra*] explain that emptiness possesses an object (*dmigs bcas*)?[31]

[Reply:] Even though it does explain this, in that context it is the emptiness of an object of refutation (*dgag bya*) that is physical matter [the body] qua aggregation of subtle atoms that is termed *emptiness.*[32] This omni-aspected matter (*rnam pa thams cad pa'i gzugs*) is conventional, it is not the reality set forth via the refutation of the object of refutation, namely true existence. The [11] gnosis of great bliss that arises from such matter perceives reality, and it is because of *this* that it is on more than one occasion called *objectless bliss.* Although a great deal is to be said in regard to these [points], because it is not something found in common [to discussions of *sūtra* and *tantra,* as it is a strictly tantric matter], and because this is not the appropriate occasion [to deal with it], I will say nothing further. Nonetheless, seeing that all of us, both members of our own school and others, being committed to the incorrect path of such [interpretations], are then hindered from belief in the profound [doctrine of] emptiness, and accumulate great quantities [of nonvirtue], I have introduced the subject.

2. *The Benefits of Trusting the Profound [Doctrine of] Emptiness*

To explain [to others] and to pursue [one's own] study based on the scriptures that teach the profound [doctrine of] emptiness and their commentaries creates a source of merit so great that it is difficult to fathom. The *Sūtrasamuccaya* says: "By having faith in the profound doctrine, all merit is accrued, and until one obtains buddhahood, one will acquire all wealth, both worldly and supramundane."[33] Also, in the *Khye'u rin po che byin pa'i mdo*[34] it says:

> Mañjuśrī, bodhisattvas who lack skill in means must practice the six perfections for a hundred thousand eons. Now if the study of this exposition, even when they are doubt ridden, makes their merits greatly increase, then what need is there to mention [the benefits] of study for those who lack doubt. If just by writing one letter [of it] one can impart instruction, then what need is there to mention [the benefits] of teaching others [this doctrine] in an extensive fashion.[35]

The *Vajracchedikā* says:

> The Blessed One spoke. "What do you think, Subhūti, all those [12] particles that there may be in the river Ganges, are they many, those particles that are in the river Ganges?"

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Subhūti replied. "The sand particles that there are in the river Ganges, oh Lord, are indeed many. How is it possible to know even the number of those sand particles?"

The Blessed One spoke. "You understand, Subhūti, you have fathomed it. Now if a man or a woman were to fill universes equal in the number to the sand particles of the river Ganges with the seven kinds of precious substances, and were then to offer it to the Tathāgata, would that man or woman generate great merit from such an action?"

Subhūti replied. "Yes, oh Lord, a great amount! A great amount, oh Tathāgata!"

The Blessed One spoke. "Whoever memorizes even one four-line stanza from this doctrinal exposition and teaches it to others would thereby generate even more merit."[36]

The *bDe bzhin gshegs pa'i mdzod kyi mdo* says: "Should those who possess even the greatest of the ten nonvirtues come to understand the selflessness of phenomena and have faith and trust in the fact that all dharmas are primordially pure, they will not go to the lower rebirths."[37] And the *bDud 'dul ba'i le'u* says:

> If a monk simply by understanding that all phenomena are utterly subdued and by understanding that even the origin of faults is naturally solitary, can thereby subdue even an *anantarīya* sin[38] without the [need to rely on the] firm and clear contrition that arises from such a fault, then what need is there to mention the fact [that such knowledge can purify] such triflings as following incorrect moral discipline or ritual.[39] [13]

The *Ajātuśatru Sūtra* also says: "Because those who commit an *anantarīya* sin can come to understand the holy Dharma and have faith in it after hearing it, I did not call that [sin] a karmic defilement."[40] These passages [all show] that in the purification of sin, there is no purifying force of greater strength than faith in emptiness.

To obtain the benefits of explaining the profound doctrine as they have been spoken of above, two prerequisites are necessary: (1) one must have a pure motivation that does not seek material wealth or fame, and (2) one must, without misapprehending the meaning of the doctrine to be explained, expound upon it in a nonerroneous way. If one possesses either one or both of these faults, one will not accrue new merit, and indeed, the previous merit one *has* accrued will degenerate. That is why the Acārya Vasubandhu has said: "Thus, whoever incorrectly explains the doctrine, or explains it with a negative attitude, such as the desire for profit, honor or fame, will degenerate enormous amounts of personal merit."

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3. The Vessel, That Is, the Listener, to Whom This Doctrine Should Be Explained[41]

[A Misconception Concerning Emptiness and Its Consequences]

This profound subject should be taught to those who in the past have repeatedly established within their minds the propensity for understanding emptiness, and not to others. This is because, although those [others] may have managed to study the scriptures that teach emptiness, with their mistaken preconceptions about emptiness, teaching it to them will be utterly useless. It is [14] utterly useless because some of them, those who have no expertise, refute emptiness and go to unfortunate realms. Others, thinking that the meaning of emptiness is that phenomena do not exist, first generate the mistaken view that is nihilistic in regard to cause and effect. Then, without turning from this false view, it grows larger and larger until, as a result of this, they are reborn into the Avīci Hell.

Now here, although the expressions *nihilistic view (med par lta ba)* and the *view that things do not exist (yod par ma yin par lta ba)* are nominally different, in terms of the way they are apprehended by the mind, that is, in terms of the way their generic images (*don spyi*) arise, there is not the slightest difference, because in both cases they [the images] arise as mere negations of existence.[42] As regards this point, in commenting on the following lines:

> When they have a faulty view of emptiness
> Those of poor intellect will degenerate.[43]

the *Prasannapadā* says:

> If one conceives of the emptiness of everything in terms of the nonexistence of everything, then this is a mistaken view. For as it is said, "If this doctrine is mistakenly understood, those who are not experts disparage it, in this way sinking into the mire of nihilism." When, however, they avoid this nihilistic attitude in regard to everything, they introspect as follows. "How is it that things that have been perceived can be empty? Hence, essencelessness cannot be the meaning of emptiness." And in no uncertain terms they refute the doctrine of emptiness. To repudiate it in this way is to create the karma of "disparaging the doctrine" (*chos kyi phongs pa*), which leads to definite rebirth in an unfortunate realm. As the *Ratnāvalī* explains:[44] "And [15] moreover, if this is misapprehended, the fools, possessing the pride of sages, refute it. Thus these unworthy *mahātmās* end up falling head first into the Avīci [hell]."[45]

One goes to Avīci not only by having a nihilistic attitude in regard to emptiness, but also by having a nihilistic attitude in regard to cause and effect. A

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multitude of reputable *sūtras* and *śāstras* all agree that to view causality as nonexistent is the cause of losing the roots of all of one's merit, and is also the cause of the degeneration of one's vows.

Still, some insist that they are claiming that [things] "do not exist" and not that "things are nonexistent." However, this scriptural citation from the *Prasannapadā* quoted earlier clearly explains that such a distinction in phrasing is both unnecessary and unjustified. That is why the *Catuḥśatakaṭīkā,* [commenting on the lines from the root text] that go: "The one [who repudiates emptiness] will be reborn into an unfortunate realm, but the extraordinary one [who comes to correctly understand it] will find peace,"[46] says: "When the unholy ones hear the doctrine of emptiness, they end up refuting and misunderstanding it, and so they can only be reborn into an unfortunate realm."[47] Therefore, to refute emptiness or to conceive of the meaning of emptiness in terms of [things] not existing are both misconceptions that bring rebirth in an unfortunate realm.

[The Characteristics of the Proper Disciple]

[Question:] How can one know the difference between a disciple to whom the doctrine of emptiness is to be taught and one to whom it is not to be taught?

[Reply:] In the *Madhyamakāvatāra* it says:

> Even though still at the stage of ordinary beings, when [some people] study emptiness, they experience great rapture and wonderment internally. Arising from this great rapture, their eyes well with tears, and [16]
> the hairs of their body stand on end. Those beings have the seed of the perfect Buddha's mind. They are the vessels to whom reality (*de nyid*) is to be taught. It is to them that the ultimate truth (*dam pa'i don gyi bden pa*) should be taught.[48]

Thus, when someone hears an unmistaken explanation of emptiness and understands its meaning, and should there, based on that understanding, well up tears that come from such wonderment, such are the unmistaken signs. However, an outburst of tears on the part of a fool who has misguided faith in a mistaken doctrine [does not indicate] firmness of mind (*yid brtan*).

[Question:] If one teaches such a suitable vessel, what kind of benefits arise from his or her having understood the doctrine of emptiness?

[Reply:] Again, the *Madhyamakāvatāra* says:

> For those who follow this [doctrine] good qualities will arise, for having taken up the practice of moral discipline, they abide by it; they engage in charity and they practice compassion; they meditate on patience; and the virtue [arising from] all of these practices they com-

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> pletely dedicate toward [the attainment] of enlightenment in order to liberate beings. And of course, they come to have faith in the perfect Bodhisattvas.[49]

To whatever extent they have understood emptiness, to that extent will their faith in the doctrine and the quantities of the merit ensuing from charity and moral discipline [increase]. The *Bodhicittavivaraṇa* also says: "Having understood the emptiness of all phenomena, one comes to trust karma and its effects. This is more marvelous than the most marvelous thing, more astonishing than the most astonishing."[50] This [fact] is mentioned in extremely praiseworthy sources.

[Opponent:] That, after meditating in order to generate certainty in the doctrine of emptiness, one [still engages] in moral discipline and so on [is a teaching] meant for those who have not understood the definitive meaning (*nges don*). How could someone who has understood the definitive meaning engage in such mental proliferations (*spros pa*), [which distinguish between good and evil, and so forth]? [17]

[Another Opponent:] Training in karma and its effects was urged provisionally for the sake of others.

[Reply:] [The adherents to] both of these [views] are identical in accepting that these [doctrines like karma and moral discipline] do not apply to themselves. Hence, they are sources of great negative karma for all, themselves as well as others, and they open the door to the unfortunate realms. One should realize this to be a case of reasoning from the effect [to the cause] (*'bras rtags yang dag*) that has led to an incorrect understanding of emptiness.

If one explains the profound doctrine of emptiness to one who is not a suitable vessel, should the one explaining emptiness possess the bodhisattva vows, the *Śikṣāsamuccaya* states that "speaking of emptiness to sentient beings who do not engage in mental training"[51] is a downfall (*pham pa*), if all of the negative emotional factors are present (*kun dkris*).

Even when [the disciple] has generated a pure understanding biased in favor of neither of the two extremes, when he or she hears an unmistaken explanation of emptiness, there may be no other [external signs] arising from amazement, [signs] such as the standing on end of hairs or the welling up of tears. If these signs are lacking, although it is not definite whether or not [the disciple] is a fit vessel for this profound doctrine, as long as they do not transgress the instructions of the holy master, [teaching it] may make them suitable vessels by newly implanting many seeds for understanding emptiness [in the future]. The *Catuḥśatakaṭīkā* says:

> If one has faith in the teachings of emptiness, one should do whatever increases one's devotion for emptiness by means of establishing conditions that are conducive to it. One's compassion should increase and one should become more grateful to the Lord, the Tathāgata. [18]

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> Those who desire to rid themselves of the great peril, the reason behind the impediments [one has] toward the holy doctrine, should rely on the subtle (*yang ba*), give though giving is difficult, and collect disciples with the four means for accumulating them (*sdu ba'i dngos po bzhi*). One should, with every effort, teach this holy doctrine to the one who is a receptacle for this doctrine of holy men.[52]

It is saying that those who have the ability to teach without erring must explain [the doctrine] with great fervor. But some, who pride themselves on having done just a little study of one or two other scriptures, and faulty study at that, without any training in the scriptural system of the Madhyamaka, where the profound abode [emptiness], so difficult to fathom, is taught, exert themselves at advising others. Without having studied the abode of stainless reasoning [the Madhyamaka scriptures] they teach or impart some trifling instruction (*man ngag*).[53] They, who have the audacity to claim that they are explaining the meaning of the profound, who do not know their own limitations, tire themselves explaining the meaning of the profound. [For them] these become, without a doubt, the dual causes [for rebirth] in an unfortunate realm, and so one should never earnestly compete with those whose audacity is so great, who are preoccupied with mere material gain and fame.

4. *The Actual Doctrine to Be Explained*[54]

4.1 *Identifying Which Scriptures Are of Definitive Meaning* (nges don) *and Which of Provisional Meaning* (drang don)[55]

Those who wish to understand reality (*de kho na nyid*) must rely on the scriptures of the Sage. Yet various kinds of scriptures are taught, depending upon [19] the various intellectual levels of the disciples. On which of these [scriptures] should one base one's examination of this profound topic [emptiness]? Know that one should examine the scriptures of definitive meaning.

Well then, what is of definitive meaning and what is of provisional meaning? In this regard, some *śrāvakas* believe that all of the scriptures of the Sage are strictly of definitive meaning, whereas others believe that there are [scriptures] of both definitive and provisional meaning.[56] [But regardless of which side they take], all [*śrāvakas*] believe that what distinguishes definitive from provisional [scriptures] is whether or not they can be taken literally. They also believe that the Mahāyāna canon is not the word of the Buddha.[57]

The Vaibhāṣikas, Sautrāntikas, and so forth, who came after the split into the eighteen subschools[58] accept only the *śrāvaka* canon as valid (*tshad ma*). Hence, those who are termed *śrāvaka* (lit. "hearer") do not accept the Mahāyāna as the word [of the Buddha]. It is because they strive for *śrāvaka*

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enlightenment (*byang chub*) that [those who challenge the authenticity of the Mahāyāna *sūtras*] are called *śrāvakas*. But how could the *Śrāvakayāna* that is the referent (*'jug gzhi*) of the word *hearer*, [that is, those actually on the *śrāvaka* path as opposed to those who are *śrāvakas* by virtue of their philosophical outlook, like Vaibhāṣikas, and so on,] be skeptical to the point of saying "I do not [believe] that the Mahāyāna is the [Buddha's] word." Even were *they* to be skeptical in this way, it would follow, absurdly, that though [such *srāvaka*] *arhants* have eliminated all afflictions (*nyon mongs*), they accumulate the karma of disparaging the doctrine (*chos spong gi las*) with the ignorance of one ridden with afflictions. It seems that for this reason Tibetans [20] have made many mistakes in their failure to distinguish between those on the *srāvaka* path (*nyan thos theg pa ba*), [who do not slander the Mahāyāna,] and *śrāvaka* philosophers (*grub mtha' smra ba*), [who *do* do so].

In distinguishing the definitive from the provisional we have the two chariots of the Mahāyāna. They are as follows: (1) the interpretation of Ārya Asaṅga and his brother [Vasubandhu] who follow the *Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra*, and (2) the method of interpretation of Ārya Nāgārjuna, the father, and his son [Āryadeva] who follow the *Ārya Akṣayamatinirdeśa Sūtra*.

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