

CHAPTER ONE

BUDDHA-NATURE AND THE UNITY OF THE TWO TRUTHS

The whole of philosophy is nothing else but a study of the definition of unity.

—G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion, Volume 1*

INTRODUCTION

Conflicting depictions of truth, and how ultimate reality should be best expressed—through negation or affirmation—is a contested issue in Mahāyāna Buddhism. In particular, this issue concerns the relationship between the affirmations of a true presence of divine wisdom on the one hand, and the negating discourse of emptiness, as evinced in scriptures such as the Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras, on the other. The competing interpretations of the relationship between contrasting descriptions of ultimate reality—as a presence and an absence—are fueled by the polysemy of Buddhist scriptures and the agenda to systematize them into a comprehensive whole.¹ This is clearly evident in how traditions in Tibet interpret Buddhist sūtras in terms of three wheels of doctrine, and in particular, how they distinguish between the “middle wheel” and the “last wheel.”

An influential scripture for interpreting scriptures for Buddhists in Tibet is the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra*,² “the scripture explaining the intent,” within which the Buddha gives guidelines for interpreting scriptures. A section of this text outlines three distinct “wheels of doctrine,” offering a resolution to

the conflicting literal statements of Buddhist teachings. The following citation from this text is a common source for the delineation of Buddha's teaching into three sections:

Thereupon, the bodhisattva Paramārthasamudgata said to the Blessed One, "Initially, the Blessed One at Deer Park, in the region of Vārāṇasī, taught the four noble truths to the ones who fully engage in the vehicle of the Auditors. He fully turned the miraculous and amazing wheel of doctrine in a way unlike anything that had been turned in this world before by anyone, human or deity. Furthermore, this wheel of doctrine that the Blessed One turned is surpassed, affords an occasion [of refutation], is the provisional meaning, and is the subject of dispute.

"Based on the essencelessness of phenomena, and based on non-arising, unceasing, primordial peace, and naturally complete nirvāṇa, the Blessed One turned the greatly miraculous and amazing second wheel of doctrine, with the feature of the discourse of emptiness, for those who fully engage in the Mahāyāna. Furthermore, this wheel of doctrine that the Blessed One turned is surpassed, affords an occasion [of refutation], is the provisional meaning, and is the subject of dispute.

"However, based on the essencelessness of phenomena, and based on non-arising, unceasing, primordial peace, and naturally complete nirvāṇa, for those who fully engage in all of the vehicles, the Blessed One taught the completely amazing and miraculous third wheel endowed with the excellent differentiation. This wheel of doctrine turned by the Blessed One is unsurpassed, affords no occasion [of refutation], is the definitive meaning, and is not the subject of dispute."³

Longchenpa, an important figure in shaping the Nyingma tradition, characterizes the first two wheels of the Buddha's Word as involving what is to be abandoned, and the last wheel as affirming what is:

The first Word, the category of the doctrine of the four truths, is mainly intended for the engagement of novices and for those with slightly inferior intellects; it clearly teaches the methods of practicing the stages of abandonment and remedy. The middle Word, the category of the doctrine of signlessness, is mainly intended for the

stages of engagement of those who have trained slightly and those with mediocre faculties; it teaches the antidote of the category of naturelessness and the apprehensions of self as non-arising. The last Word, the category of the doctrine of the definitive meaning, is mainly [intended] for the stages of engagement of those who fully [train in all] vehicles and for those of sharp faculties; it extensively teaches the category of the basic nature as it is. The first [Word] shows the path that counteracts what is to be abandoned—the character of *saṃsāra*. The middle [Word] shows, from what is to be abandoned, the abandonment of cognitive obscurations through the nature of apprehension lacking essence. The last [Word] shows the essential nature as it is.⁴

In this way, he shows a progression of the three wheels of doctrine in which the first two wheels show what is to be abandoned—the character of *saṃsāra* and cognitive obscurations—and the last wheel shows what is, the essential nature. Similarly, in his autocommentary of his *Resting in the Nature of Mind*, Longchenpa also states that the three wheels of doctrine are intended for those of differing capacities: the first wheel is intended for those of inferior faculties, the middle wheel is intended for those of mediocre faculties, and the last wheel is intended for those of sharp faculties.⁵ Longchenpa again shows the preeminence of the last wheel in his autocommentary of his *Treasury of Words and Meanings*:

From the three wheels of doctrine taught by the Victorious One, this topic was taught in the last wheel that ascertains the ultimate, yet you have failed to understand this. If solely emptiness were the ultimate, then what sense does it make that the Buddha taught three wheels separately? He taught emptiness as a provisional meaning, with the intention of merely negating fear of the abiding reality, and apprehension of self by novices.⁶

Longchenpa argues that solely emptiness, a mere absence, is not the ultimate. He states here that the topic of the last wheel of doctrine is the ultimate and that emptiness is a provisional meaning. Distinguishing the category of “the definitive meaning,” as opposed to “provisional meanings,” is a common way Buddhists differentiate what is really true from what is only *provisionally*, or *heuristically*, true. In his autocommentary of his *Resting in the Nature of Mind*, Longchenpa says that emptiness is not the definitive

meaning: “Although you fixate upon no-self and emptiness, these are merely antidotes to the self and the non-empty; they are not the definitive meaning.”⁷ Also, in the *Treasury of Philosophies*, he states:

Seeing the nature of that which is the expanse of the ultimate truth is called “seeing the ultimate truth,” the ultimate truth is not an emptiness that is nothing whatsoever. That [emptiness] is taught to immature beings and to novices as an antidote to ego-clinging, etc. In actuality, it should be known that the luminous and clear expanse exists as unconditioned and spontaneously present.⁸

In these texts, Longchenpa explicitly states that *emptiness alone* is not the ultimate truth. We will return to the works of Longchenpa later, as he is perhaps the most significant influence on Mipam’s writings. We will also look in some detail in this chapter at Bötrül’s commentary on Mipam’s work. First we will turn to Mipam.

MIPAM’S SYNTHESIS

Mipam takes Longchenpa’s explanations as a foundation for his interpretation that integrates the middle and last wheels of doctrine. Mipam does not relegate the status of *either* emptiness in the middle wheel *or* wisdom in the last wheel of doctrine as a provisional meaning. Rather, he argues that *both* are definitive:

The emptiness taught in the middle wheel and the exalted body and wisdom⁹ taught in the last wheel should be integrated as a unity of emptiness and appearance. Without dividing or excluding the definitive meaning subject matters of the middle and last wheels, both should be held to be the definitive meaning in the way of just this assertion by the omniscient Longchen Rapjam.¹⁰

Mipam cites Longchenpa as a source to support his interpretation of the unity of emptiness and wisdom as the definitive meaning of the middle and last wheels.¹¹ Mipam explains that the last wheel’s status as the definitive meaning does not refer to everything taught in the last wheel, but specifically concerns the teaching of Buddha-nature:

Even though the reasoning that analyzes the ultimate establishes the emptiness of all phenomena, it does not negate the qualities of [Buddha-]nature, because although the sublime qualities exist, they are also claimed to be essentially empty. Therefore, the meaning demonstrated by the middle wheel that all the phenomena of thorough affliction and complete purification are taught to be empty is established as such because Buddha-nature is also the nature of emptiness. However, since this teaching of [Buddha-]nature—characterized as neither conjoined with nor separable from the appearances of the empty-natured exalted body and wisdom—is the viewpoint of the definitive meaning sūtras of the last wheel, then by merely this fact it is superior to the middle wheel. Although the meaning of the last wheel is praised in the sūtras and commentaries, [this does] not [refer to] everything in the last wheel, but is spoken in this way concerning the definitive meaning position of demonstrating the [Buddha-]nature.¹²

Mipam says that the last wheel is superior to the middle because of the distinctive teaching of Buddha-nature as inseparable from the empty appearances of the exalted body and wisdom.¹³ He also states that through integrating the middle and last wheels of doctrine as noncontradictory in this way, such an understanding of Buddha-nature becomes the crucial point within the quintessential instructions of the Vajrayāna:

By maintaining both of these [wheels] to be the definitive meaning, there is not only no contradiction that one [wheel] must be held as the provisional meaning, but having integrated them, there is the essential point of the quintessential instructions of the Vajrayāna through the Buddha-nature as such taken as the meaning of the causal continuum.¹⁴ Therefore, you should know how the teachings of the Buddha converge on this single essential point and that this consummate meaning is the single viewpoint of the Sublime Ones such as Nāgārjuna and Asaṅga, for it can be clearly understood through [Nāgārjuna's] *Dharmadhātustotra*, *Bodhicittavivaraṇa*, etc., and [Asaṅga's] commentary on the *Uttaratantra* and so forth.¹⁵

Through his interpretation of Buddha-nature, he shows the compatibility of the middle wheel and last wheel, as well as the convergence of Nāgārjuna

and Asaṅga upon a single viewpoint.¹⁶ The inseparable unity of Buddha-nature and emptiness is a central issue for Mipam:

The single essential point of all the doctrines of Sūtra and Mantra is only this all-pervasive Buddha-nature . . . when speaking, the Sugata teacher sometimes elucidated the essence (*ngo bo*) of the Buddha-nature by means of teaching emptiness, and at other times elucidated the nature (*rang bzhin*) of the Buddha-nature through the aspect of teaching the [Buddha's] qualities of the powers and so forth as a primordial endowment. These two need to be integrated without contradiction. However, due to the influence of not having found conviction in the extremely profound of profound essential points—the indivisibility of the two truths—some people view the Buddha-nature as a permanent phenomenon that is not essentially empty, while others, holding onto a mere void, remain in the denigrating position of a view of annihilation that cannot posit the primordial endowment of the inseparable qualities of wisdom.¹⁷

Mipam states that it is important to integrate as noncontradictory the Buddha's teachings of emptiness, which elucidate the essence of Buddha-nature, with the teachings of the primordial endowment of qualities, which elucidate the nature of Buddha-nature.¹⁸ He reveals that the essential point to the resolution of the issue of Buddha-nature and emptiness is the indivisibility of the two truths.

TWO TRUTHS

A central theme in Buddhism is the doctrine of two truths: (1) the ultimate and (2) the relative, or conventional, truth. An important part of Mipam's interpretation is his unique model that renders the two truths in two distinct ways:

There are two ways in which the two truths are stated within the [Buddha's] Word and śāstras: (1) from the perspective of valid cognition analyzing the ultimate abiding reality, emptiness is called "ultimate" and appearance is called "relative," and (2) from the perspective of conventional valid cognition analyzing the mode of appearance, the subjects and objects of the incontrovertible accor-

dance between the modes of appearance and reality [i.e., authentic experience] are called “ultimate” and the opposite [i.e., inauthentic experience] are called “relative.”¹⁹

Mipam describes one two-truth scheme as a dichotomy of appearance and emptiness. In the division of the two truths within this scheme, emptiness is the *only* ultimate and *all* appearances are relative. He defines the “relative” and “ultimate” as follows:

The relative is the mode of appearance which is like an illusion, a dream, or a floating hair—while lacking intrinsic nature, appearing that way—like production, etc. The ultimate is the mode of reality lacking production, etc., when the nature of those appearances are analyzed.²⁰

This two-truth scheme equates emptiness with the ultimate and appearances with the relative. In this scheme, the ultimate is only emptiness—the lack of intrinsic nature of phenomena when their nature is analyzed.

Bötrül, an influential commentator on Mipam’s works, explains the two truths as appearance/emptiness by means of the evaluated object (*gzhal don*) of ultimate valid cognition²¹ being authentic or not:

The two truths are divided by means of appearance and emptiness through the evaluated object of ultimate valid cognition analyzing the mode of reality being authentic or not: emptiness, which is the authentic evaluated object, is “ultimate truth”; appearances, which are not authentic, are “relative.”²²

The two truths here are delineated by means of ultimate valid cognition, where emptiness alone is the authentic object of evaluation. The nature of appearances is not found when analyzed; upon ultimate analysis of phenomena, nothing is found—only emptiness. Mipam states: “The phenomena that are the realm of thought and speech, when analyzed are lacking; therefore, they are empty like an illusion and are never able to withstand analysis.”²³

Ultimate analysis negates whatever the mind takes as a perceived object. There is nothing that withstands such analysis: “An object which the mind takes as support that cannot be refuted by Middle Way reasoning is impossible.”²⁴ Even so, emptiness, as the lack of inherent nature in the face of

ultimate analysis, does not disrupt appearances, but is the necessary condition for appearance. Mipam states:

All phenomena are just dependent arisings: existent entities are dependent productions (*brten nas skyes ba*) and nonentities are dependent imputations (*brten nas btags pa*). In this way, all phenomena that are comprised by dependent arisings lack inherent nature because if they had inherent nature, dependent arisings would not be reasonable.²⁵

Existent entities arise in dependence upon something else; they are dependent arisings. “Nonentities” like space are also dependent because they are imputed in dependence upon entities.²⁶ This interdependence does not make phenomena go away, but is the necessary condition for their arising. Also, this is why phenomena lack any truly established, individual essences.

Appearances are not found when they are analyzed; therefore, they are empty. However, emptiness is not some separate reality *behind* appearances. Rather, in the appearance/emptiness dichotomy of two truths, the two truths are in actuality an inseparable unity. Mipam states: “If there is no appearance, then there is also no emptiness of that [appearance]. Mutually, both appearance and emptiness are such that one is impossible without the other; if there is one, there is the other.”²⁷ In this way, emptiness and appearance are also interdependent.

Mipam describes the relationship between the relative and the ultimate as being “essentially the same with different contradistinctions” in the appearance/emptiness model of the two truths:

From the perspective of supreme knowledge’s analysis of what is authentic,
Both appearance and emptiness—
Together present, together absent—are asserted as essentially the same, and
Divisible into different contradistinctions.²⁸

He further states:

All appearances are mere imputations;
Emptiness²⁹ is also merely imputed by the mind.³⁰

Thus, the two truths are not actually distinct but are only conceptually distinct; in other words, they are “two sides of the same coin.” He also states:

“Appearing” and “relative” are the same in meaning because appearance should be understood as appearing yet not truly established as it appears. One should understand that the phrase “not truly existent” also does not have to indicate erroneous appearances, because “not truly existent” designates what is empty. If it [appearance] were established the way it appeared and were true as it appeared, then the designation “relative”³¹ would not be appropriate. In that way it would not be empty and the manner of the impossibility of a non-empty entity being an object of knowledge is authentically established by reason; therefore, it is impossible within this sphere of what can be known for a phenomenon to be exclusively one part which is detached from both appearance and emptiness.³²

In this way, emptiness and interdependently arising phenomena are coextensive. For Mipam, there is nothing that appears and is not empty, nor is there any emptiness that does not appear; they are mutually present or mutually absent:

If there is appearance, the emptiness of that [appearance] is designated as “emptiness,” but the meaning of emptiness is not a lack of appearance, such as a horn of a rabbit, because that is nonexistent conventionally. Hence, the words “emptiness of horn” is applied to the rabbit horn, but it is [just] the meaning of utter absence. Emptiness is the suchness of all conventionally existent phenomena. . . . Therefore, this emptiness is what is to be established as the intrinsic nature, or abiding reality, of all conventionally existent phenomena; it is not at all to be established as the suchness of that which does not exist conventionally.³³

Here he describes emptiness as not something else that is separate from conventionally existent phenomena. Furthermore, Mipam cites Longchenpa stating that when ascertaining the emptiness of a phenomenon, it does not help if the phenomenon’s emptiness is (erroneously) thought to be something different from the phenomenon—just as it does not affect the presence of anger toward an enemy to know that space is empty:

In the *Precious Wish-Fulfilling Treasury*, when refuting the traditions of those who accept appearance and emptiness as different, such as the master Śrīgupta in the class of lower Svātantrikas,³⁴ the powerful victor, Longchen Rapjam states reasons that (1) an emptiness that is not an appearance is impossible as either of the two truths, (2) nor is it suitable to be realized, and (3) if [emptiness and appearance are] different, [emptiness] is not reasonable to be an antidote for what is abandoned because knowing the emptiness of something else, while holding onto the ground of false appearance, does not help at all—as it does not help to know the emptiness of space when anger arises towards an enemy, there is no purpose in realizing such an emptiness.³⁵

In Mipam's appearance/emptiness model, only what appears (or is perceived) is empty; there is no substrate of emptiness that is beyond perceptible reality:

There is no ultimate apart from the relative,
 There is no relative at all other than the ultimate.
 Whatever appears is necessarily empty,
 Whatever is empty necessarily appears
 Because appearance that is not empty is impossible
 And emptiness as well is not established without appearance.³⁶

He depicts the quality of emptiness as an essential property of all objects of knowledge. In this way, he preserves the integrity of the Buddhist claims to the universality of emptiness in the middle wheel of doctrine.

The ultimate truth is not privileged in the two truths as appearance/emptiness because the two truths here are not actually distinct. Thus, in this characterization of the two truths as emptiness/appearance, neither of the two truths is superior to the other:

The unreal appearances are called “relative” and the emptiness that is the lack of intrinsic nature is called “ultimate.” Without being regarded with a qualitative difference, both of these are equally applied [to all phenomena] from form to omniscience. If you know this, there is certainly nothing more important to know within the sphere of what can be known.³⁷

The unity of appearance and emptiness is an important part of Mipam's interpretation that we will return to again.

In his other scheme, Mipam represents the two truths not as appearance/emptiness, but as a dichotomy of appearances in accord or not with reality (i.e., authentic/inauthentic experience). Appearances that accord with reality, that is, pure appearances that are not bifurcated into a separate subject and object, are the ultimate truth. Dualistic appearances are the relative truth. In this way, emptiness is not the only ultimate because appearances can be both ultimate (e.g., pure, nondual appearances) and relative (e.g., impure, dualistic appearances). The two truths as authentic/inauthentic experience are not delineated from the perspective of ultimate analysis, but from a conventional perspective:

Positing (1) both the objects and subjects for which the mode of appearance is in accord with the mode of reality as ultimate and (2) both the objects and subjects for which appearance and reality are not in accord as relative, should be posited as such due to being conventionally nondeceptive or deceptive.³⁸

Expanding upon this distinction, Bötrül states:

Also, concerning analyses of the manner of appearance, by means of its evaluated object being authentic or not at the time of evaluation from the perspective of a conventional valid cognition, the two truths are divided: (1) as the authentic mode of the abiding reality, both appearance and emptiness are ultimate, such as the emptiness-object and the wisdom-subject for which appearance is in accord with reality, and (2) as inauthentic modes of appearance, the aspects of distortion are relative, such as the subjects and objects for which appearance is not in accord with reality.³⁹

In this scheme, the ultimate is defined as “authentic experience” (*gnas snang mthun*)⁴⁰—literally, “the mode of appearance in accord with the way it is” (and the subject that experiences it as such). The relative is the opposite of this, “inauthentic experience” (*gnas snang mi mthun*)—“the mode of appearance not in accord with the way it is” (and the subject that experiences it as such). This distinction is an appearance-reality distinction such that experience in meditation is true in contrast to the distorted perceptions of non-meditative states.

In the two-truth model of authentic/inauthentic experience, we can see how the two truths are not qualitatively the same, but are a hierarchy—the

ultimate truth is undistorted truth while the relative truth is distorted and false. This treatment of relative truth reflects the meaning of “relative” (*kun rdzob, saṃvṛti*) as concealing. In this two-truth model, we find a context in which the ultimate truth is privileged above the relative truth and is not just the empty quality of appearance. Mipam relates this dichotomy of two truths to the dichotomy of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa:

It is suitable to posit that all phenomena of nirvāṇa, which are attained through the power of appearance in accord with reality, are ultimate; and that all phenomena of saṃsāra, which arise through the power of appearance that does not accord with reality, are relative.⁴¹

He clearly states two ways in which the two truths are to be understood: (1) as emptiness and appearance and (2) as what is distorted and what is undistorted:

The appearances which are included in the relative also need to be distinguished as distorted or undistorted, deceptive or nondeceptive—not everything that is relative must necessarily be a distorted appearance. Nor must everything with the name ultimate be solely empty because the two ways to arrive at the distinctive names in [two] manners of assessing the relative and ultimate are widely proclaimed in the great sūtras and śāstras.⁴²

In this way, he depicts two models of the two truths.

Mipam accommodates the presence of wisdom in his second two-truth scheme of authentic/inauthentic experience. Thereby, he does not reduce the ultimate truth to a mere absence, nor does he categorically reject as ultimate the presence of the authentic experience of wisdom. By this, descriptions of ultimate truth are not limited to only negations, but the presence of wisdom can be affirmed as ultimate truth because wisdom is ultimate—as an authentic and undistorted experience of reality—in the two-truth model of authentic/inauthentic experience. In this way, this model provides a context for asserting the ultimate truth as an undistorted reality (and *not just a negation of distortion*).

Mipam validates nonconceptual wisdom as ultimate truth due to its presence in ultimate reality. While doing so, he also preserves the appearance/emptiness two-truth scheme and a context for the critique of the onto-

logical status of all reality, including the presence of wisdom. Mipam does not curtail the universality of emptiness. Rather, he states: “The latter ultimate [authentic experience] also is empty of essence.”⁴³ In this way, he synthesizes two models of two truths. We can see that instead of an “either/or” interpretation of the presence of wisdom and emptiness, he adopts a “both/and” position by means of these two models of two truths:

In the great scriptures there are two ways in which the two truths are posited: (1) the term “ultimate” designates reality as non-arising and the term “relative” designates the conventional mode of appearance, and (2) in terms of conventional apprehension, the term “ultimate” designates both the subject and object of authentic experience and the term “relative” designates both the subject and object of inauthentic experience. In this manner, whether in Sūtra or Mantra, the term “ultimate” also applies to the subject . . . although the terms “ultimate” and “relative” are the same in these two systems, the way of presenting the meaning is different. Therefore, if one does not know how to explain having made the distinction between the viewpoints of each respective system, the hope of fathoming the great scriptures will be dashed—like a mind as narrow as the eye of a needle measuring space.⁴⁴

These two systems of two truths support Mipam’s interpretation of the compatibility of the emptiness taught in the middle wheel and the wisdom taught in the last wheel as both the definitive meaning. Emptiness as the ultimate truth in Mipam’s appearance/emptiness model supports his exegesis of emptiness in the middle wheel of doctrine and the unity of the two truths. The inclusion of wisdom as ultimate truth in Mipam’s authentic/inauthentic experience model supports his exegesis of wisdom in the last wheel of doctrine and Buddha-nature, as will be further shown below.

BUDDHA-NATURE AS THE UNITY OF APPEARANCE AND EMPTINESS

Buddha-nature is a topic discussed in both the *Madhyamakāvatāra* and the *Uttaratantra*, two important exoteric Buddhist texts of Indian śāstra. The former represents a systematic commentary on the sūtras of the middle wheel of doctrine, and the latter is a commentary on the sūtras of the last

wheel of doctrine. We will see how Bötrül, following Mipam, brings these two treatises together around the topic of Buddha-nature.

Bötrül explains Candrakīrti's description of the ultimate in the *Madhyamakāvatāra*, the object of authentic seeing, as the ultimate truth of the two truths as appearance/emptiness:

The viewpoint of the root text and [auto]commentary of Candrakīrti, which is the meaning-commentary on the great śāstra, the *Prajñāmūlamadhyamaka[-kārikā]*,⁴⁵ is also the two truths as appearance and emptiness; it is not seen otherwise. From the *Madhyamakāvatāra*:

[Buddha] said that all entities found by authentic and false seeing are apprehended as two essences:

That which is the object of authentic seeing is ultimate; false seeings are relative truths.⁴⁶

Authentic seeing, which is only the emptiness that is an object of the wisdom of meditative equipoise, is posited as ultimate; false seeings are all aspects of appearance, like an illusion or a dream, posited as relative. Such an emptiness, which is the ultimate truth, is ascertained through the ultimate valid cognition that analyzes the mode of reality [through] the negation of production by means of the four extremes, etc. However, there is not a single word in the "Collection of Reasonings"⁴⁷ of the Middle Way, or the root text and [auto]commentary of the *Madhyamakāvatāra*, that is a presentation that posits the two truths in which the ultimate [is] nirvāṇa and the relative [is] saṃsāra by means of pure conventional valid cognition analyzing the mode of appearance. Therefore, it is established that this manner of dividing the two truths as appearance/emptiness is the unsurpassed viewpoint of these scriptures.⁴⁸

In this way, Bötrül states that Candrakīrti delineates the two truths as appearance/emptiness. He also characterizes the appearance/emptiness model of the two truths as the viewpoint of the middle wheel of doctrine:

The manner of positing the two truths by means of appearance/emptiness is the viewpoint of the profound, definitive meaning sūtras of the middle Word of signlessness such as the extensive, middling, and condensed Mother [Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras]

because of mainly teaching the topic—the positing of all appearances from form to omniscience as relative phenomena, and emptiness, which is the nonestablished essence of those, as the ultimate truth.⁴⁹

In contrast, Bötrül characterizes the authentic/inauthentic model of the two truths—appearance in accord with reality or not—as the manner of positing the two truths in the definitive meaning sūtras of the last wheel:

The manner of positing the two truths by means of whether or not appearance accords with reality is [the viewpoint] of the definitive meaning sūtras of the last Word, such as the ten [Buddha-]Nature Sūtras, for which:

- the distinction of the definitive meaning Buddha-nature is asserted as the ultimate which is appearance in accord with the reality—from the empty aspect it is the nature endowed with the three gates of liberation, the essentially empty, objective expanse of phenomena (*yul chos kyi dbyings*); and from the aspect of appearance, it is inseparable from the qualities of knowledge, love, and powers, the natural luminous clarity of the subjective wisdom (*yul can ye shes*), and
- the aspect of adventitious defilements, the distorted appearances which are the nature of saṃsāra—the subjects and objects that are the separable aspects that do not abide in the foundational nature of reality—are asserted as the relative which are appearances that do not accord with reality.⁵⁰

Bötrül says here that, from the aspect of emptiness, Buddha-nature is the objective expanse of phenomena that is essentially empty. From the aspect of appearance, Buddha-nature is the subjective wisdom that is not empty of the inseparable qualities of naturally luminous and clear wisdom, yet is empty of the adventitious defilements that are the distorted appearances of the nature of saṃsāra.

Bötrül further expands upon Mipam's delineation of the two models of truth in his interpretation of Buddha-nature. Bötrül states that in terms of appearance in accord with reality (the two truths as authentic/inauthentic experience), Buddha-nature is ultimate; in terms of the two truths as appearance/emptiness, Buddha-nature has aspects of both of the two truths:

Both the appearing and empty aspects of heritage, the basic element, [Buddha-]nature, etc. are posited as ultimate from the aspect of appearance in accord with reality; however, through the manner of delineating the relative from the aspect of appearance and the ultimate from the empty aspect, it has [aspects of] both the truths of appearance and emptiness.⁵¹

In the former model of authentic/inauthentic experience, Buddha-nature is only the ultimate truth as authentic experience; in the latter model of appearance/emptiness, Buddha-nature has aspects of both relative and ultimate truth because Buddha-nature is empty and it appears.

Bötrül states that traditions that only accept the two truths as appearance/emptiness, without accepting the two truths as authentic/inauthentic experience, have cast away the profound meaning of Buddha-nature and tantra:

These days, the two truths of appearance and emptiness is only widely known, but it is rare to perceive one who knows the profound two truths of whether or not appearance accords with reality (i.e., authentic/inauthentic experience). It appears that the positions that accept the indivisibility of appearance and emptiness are cast far away: such as the presentation of the profound meaning intended by the definitive meaning sūtras and tantras, Buddha-nature—the unity of appearance and emptiness—as ultimate, and the Mahāyoga tradition’s presentation of the indivisibility of purity and equality as the ultimate truth.⁵²

His polemical claim apparently addresses the widespread dominance of Geluk commentaries that emphasize a model of the two truths as appearance/emptiness. Misrepresenting his distinction as a confession, John Pettit cites that Bötrül “admits [that the authentic/inauthentic experience distinction], is unusual,”⁵³ implying that this distinction is somehow heterodox. On the contrary, it is clear that this model of the two truths and the appearance/emptiness model are both important in Bötrül’s and Mipam’s works. In fact, the authentic/inauthentic experience model is a principal way the two truths are represented in the exegeses of the last wheel and tantras.⁵⁴ Moreover, far from heterodox, this distinction is also found in the predominant Geluk tradition.⁵⁵

Furthermore, Bötrül says that the tradition of Prāsaṅgika accepts both two-truth models:

In the scriptures of the Prāsaṅgika tradition, as was just explained, since the commentaries on the middle Word, such as the “Collection of Reasonings” and the root text and [auto]commentary of the *Madhyamakāvatāra*, posit the two truths by means of appearance and emptiness, and the commentaries on the last Word, such as the root text and commentary of the *Uttaratantra*, posit the two truths by means of whether or not appearance is in accord with reality, both manners of positing the two truths are accepted as one essential point without contradiction; only accepting either one and rejecting the other is not done. For this very reason, both: (1) scriptures of Candrakīrti, such as the root and [auto]commentary of the *Madhyamakāvatāra*, and (2) the *Uttaratantra* scripture of the supreme, great regent Maitreyanātha, also are within one essential point, without contradiction, scriptures of the Mahāyāna Prāsaṅgika.⁵⁶

Bötrül states that Candrakīrti delineates the two truths as emptiness/appearance, while the *Uttaratantra* delineates the two truths as whether or not appearance is in accord with reality (i.e., authentic/inauthentic experience). He argues that both texts have the same viewpoint. Furthermore, in his *Notes on the Essential Points of [Mipam’s] Exposition [of Buddha-Nature]*, Bötrül states:

If it is asked, “Well, which is the manner of positing the two truths in the Prāsaṅgika tradition?” Both are posited without contradiction. Moreover, Candrakīrti, emphasizing the former [appearance/emptiness model], elucidated the empty essence of all phenomena. The *Uttaratantra*, although emphasizing the latter [authentic/inauthentic experience model], is in accord with the former because the nature of emptiness is established as luminous clarity (*’od gsal ba*). Therefore, this is the reason why both the *Madhyamakāvatāra* and the *Uttaratantra* fall to one essential point, without contradiction, as Prāsaṅgika scriptures.⁵⁷

He explains that the nature of emptiness is luminous clarity; this is the reason why there is no contradiction between Candrakīrti’s *Madhyamakāvatāra* and the *Uttaratantra* as both Prāsaṅgika texts.⁵⁸ Thus, Buddha-nature,

as the unity of emptiness and luminous clarity, is an important topic around which Böttrül synthesizes the *Madhyamakāvatāra* and the *Uttaratantra*, and establishes them both as Prāsaṅgika texts. We will look further at Prāsaṅgika in the next chapter and continue here with Mipam's interpretation of Buddha-nature.

A stanza that is frequently cited to support that Buddha-nature is not empty is found in the *Uttaratantra*:

The basic element (*khams*) is empty of those adventitious
[phenomena] that have the character of separability,
But not empty of the unexcelled properties that have the character
of inseparability.⁵⁹

Mipam glosses this stanza as follows:

All of the faults of saṃsāra arise from the deluded mind which apprehends a personal self or a self of phenomena. Since this deluded mind also is adventitious like clouds in the sky, from the beginning neither mixing nor polluting the luminous clarity of the primordial basic nature, these faults are individually distinguished from the basic element and are suitable to be removed. Therefore, the essence of the basic element is empty of these faults; it is untainted. Without depending on the polluting delusion, it is luminous and clear by its own nature; self-existing wisdom permeates the thusness of all phenomena. It is not empty of that which it is inseparable from, the basic element of consummate qualities, because in its essence this is the basic nature from which it is inseparable—like the sun and light rays.⁶⁰

Mipam states that the basic element (Buddha-nature) is empty of adventitious defilements, yet not empty of consummate qualities. These consummate qualities are inseparable from the suchness of phenomena that is luminous clarity and self-existing wisdom.

Böttrül explains that the first half of the stanza from the *Uttaratantra* previously quoted shows distorted phenomena of duality as relative, and the second half shows Buddha-nature as ultimate:

Also in the context of the *Mahāyāna-Uttaratantra*, “. . . But not empty of the unexcelled properties that have the character of insepa-

rability,” shows as ultimate: the luminous clarity that is the self-vibrancy (*rang gdangs*) of the empty essence, the Buddha-nature—the heritage which is the basic element—inseparable from the qualities of the Truth Body that is a freed effect (*bral ’bras*); and, “The basic element is empty of those adventitious [phenomena] that have the character of separability,” shows as relative: the defilements which do not abide in the foundation—the distorted phenomena of perceived-perceiver [duality]—which are separable through the power of training in the path of the antidote.⁶¹

Bötrül shows that the *Uttaratantra* demonstrates Buddha-nature, the unity of luminous clarity and emptiness, as ultimate. Since both the empty and appearing aspects are ultimate in this context, Buddha-nature also reflects the ultimate truth as authentic experience.

In addition to the stanza from the *Uttaratantra*, another source to support the interpretation of the empty quality of Buddha-nature is found within Candrakīrti’s autocommentary on the *Madhyamakāvatāra* (VI.95). Mipam cites this passage in the context of refuting the view that Buddha-nature is truly established and not empty.⁶² In this citation, originally found in the *Lañkāvatārasūtra*, Mahāmati asks the Buddha how Buddha-nature is different from the Self proclaimed by non-Buddhists. The Buddha answers as follows:

Mahāmati, my Buddha-nature teaching is not similar to the non-Buddhists’ declaration of Self. Mahāmati, the Tathāgatas, Arhats, and completely perfect Buddhas teach Buddha-nature as the meaning of the words: emptiness, the authentic limit, nirvāṇa, non-arising, wishlessness, etc. For the sake of immature beings who are frightened by selflessness, they teach by means of Buddha-nature.⁶³

Bötrül states that, from the empty aspect, Buddha-nature is not like the Self of the non-Buddhists because it is inseparable from the great emptiness distinguished by the “three gates of liberation” (i.e., empty essence, signless cause, wishless effect). He says that from the aspect of appearance, Buddha-nature is not without qualities, as in the tradition of the Nirgrantha,⁶⁴ because it has a nature with the qualities of luminous clarity distinguished by knowledge, love, and powers:

From the aspect of appearance, unlike the Nirgrantha, [Buddha-nature] is distinguished by the qualities of the luminous and clear

nature—knowledge, love, and powers; and from the empty aspect, unlike the Self of the non-Buddhists, [Buddha-nature] is distinguished by the essence of great emptiness—the three gates of liberation.⁶⁵

Bötrül shows that Buddha-nature is not like the Self of the non-Buddhists due to the empty aspect. The emphasis on the empty aspect of Buddha-nature reflects the ultimate in the two truths of appearance/emptiness that Bötrül delineates as the manner that Candrakīrti posits the two truths. The unity of the empty and appearing aspects of luminous clarity reflects the ultimate in the two truths of authentic/inauthentic experience that Bötrül delineates as the manner that the two truths are posited in the *Uttaratantra*. Thus, through Mipam's twofold depiction of the two truths, Bötrül synthesizes Candrakīrti's treatment of Buddha-nature in the *Madhyamakāvatāra* with the description from the *Uttaratantra*.

Furthermore, Bötrül's teacher and Mipam's student, Khenpo Künpel, states as follows in his commentary on Mipam's *Beacon of Certainty*:

In general, if the essence of Buddha-nature were not empty, it would not be different from the permanent Self of the non-Buddhists; therefore, the nature of the three gates of liberation was taught. Also, if the wisdom of luminous clarity did not exist, being an utterly void emptiness like space, there would be no difference from the Nirgrantha; therefore, the unconditioned wisdom of luminous clarity was taught. Thus, the definitive scriptures of the middle and last Word of the teacher show the empty essence and the natural clarity.⁶⁶

Thus, the meaning of Buddha-nature, like the meaning of emptiness, is explained as not only an absence, but as the unity of appearance, or clarity, and emptiness.

BUDDHA-NATURE AS THE DEFINITIVE MEANING

Bötrül describes such a Buddha-nature as the definitive meaning. He shows the criteria for distinguishing the definitive meaning from a provisional meaning by stating that it is a provisional meaning if the literal teaching has three features: (1) a basis within an [other] intention (*dgongs gzhi*), (2) a purpose (*dgos pa*), and (3) explicit invalidation (*dnegos la gnod byed*):