

Adele Tomlin

A Bird with Two Wings: Flying with the Correct View of Emptiness

May 1, 2023



Hello everyone. My name is Adele Tomlin. I'm a writer, dharma translator, and scholar within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition and the founder of Dakini Translations and Publications. In this dharma talk, I will speak about the two views of emptiness as presented in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Before doing so, I will give a brief introduction about myself and my connection to this topic.

On the one hand, I was delighted to be asked to present a dharma talk for Tricycle on one of my favorite subjects, emptiness. On the other hand, I know that teaching about emptiness is not easy—or even recommended. Generally speaking, in the Buddhist tradition, only people who have realized emptiness, not just conceptually but also experientially, are supposed to teach it. In that respect, I do not feel fully qualified. However, I am able to teach what I learned during my research and translation of *Taranatha's Commentary on the Heart Sutra*, which is my first published book on this topic, as well as discuss the more practical implications of it through my own practice and experience of these teachings.

Now, some might wonder, why is it important to know about the view of emptiness? Well, the correct view of emptiness is considered a crucial part of study and training for any dedicated Buddhist practitioner. In fact, the “correct view” is an essential part of practice. Realizing emptiness means that our thoughts and actions are no longer conditioned by dualistic, self-centered thinking of self and other. It loosens our solid and serious perceptions of realities and opinions about people and phenomena. In that respect, as with love and compassion, it is not possible to be fully awakened and act in genuinely beneficial ways without wisdom. Without wisdom, our actions are stained with ignorance, or what some call “unwise compassion,” which means that even well-intentioned speech or acts still cause harm due to the lack of wisdom. Without the “correct view” of wisdom (Tib. *sherab*), having only the method (Tib. *tab*) is taught to be like a bird: with only one wing, one cannot really get off the ground, let alone fly, soar, and land safely.

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In this talk, I will give an overview of the main differences between the two views of emptiness, “empty-of-other” (Tib. *zhentong*) and “empty-of-self” (Tib. *rangtong*), with the “empty-of-other” view considered the higher ultimate view of reality, or the buddha nature. These two views were developed by Tibetan Buddhist scholars and masters based on their intensive study, debate, and practice of the texts of ancient Indian Buddhist panditas. This is followed by an explanation of the importance of understanding these two views of emptiness for meditative practice.

As this short talk is intended for a more general, nonacademic audience, if people want more detail, then I would recommend that they get my book, *Taranatha's Commentary on the Heart Sutra*, which has an extensive introduction on this topic. However, I hope that this talk at least gives some people an idea of what the two views are and why they are important not just for philosophy scholars or historians but for everyday life and practice.

2) Great Wisdom Mother of Perfection of Wisdom

Before getting into more conceptual detail, I first wanted to share this stunning visual. A picture speaks one thousand words, as we say, and this classic and ancient iconography of the Great Mother of Perfection of Wisdom (Tib. Yum Chenmo) was newly created entirely out of the *Heart Sutra* mantra in Tibetan by master calligrapher Jamyang Dorje Chakrishar, which is on the cover of my book. It is a perfect example of the perfection of wisdom.

For me, this ancient Buddhist image symbolizes the meaning of the ultimate nature of reality and the two views of emptiness as taught by the Buddha. Her first two hands are in the meditative posture, representing meditative practice and realization. Her left holds a volume of texts representing study and *prajna* (Skt., wisdom). Her right holds a vajra, representing the great bliss ultimate nature, *jhana* (Skt., primordial awareness), the *dharmakaya*. She is represented as a

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woman and called the mother of all the buddhas, symbolizing her all-embracing, loving, compassionate nature that gives birth to all.

3) Differences between the Two Views of Emptiness

Now, I'll speak about the two views of emptiness and their differences. As for the historical origin of the phrases "empty-of-self" (rangtong) and "empty-of-other" (zhentong), I speak about this in detail in my introduction to *Taranatha's Commentary on the Heart Sutra*. In brief, its origin is Indian. Even if they did not use the explicit term, "zhentong in Tibet, it appears that the Third Karmapa, Rangjung Dorje, as well as the Jonang master, Kunkhyen Dolpopa, are generally considered to be the first to originate the view of zhentong in Tibet, with Dolpopa using the term "zhentong" in a systematic way in Tibet. These views did cause some intense debate. Some historians even say this debate caused the Fifth Dalai Lama and Gelugpa lineage that took over Tibet in the 17th century, with the help of the Mongolian army, to seal and ban the printing of such texts. Some of these texts have only been recently rediscovered in the last 50 years or so in Gelugpa monasteries and the library of the Fifth Dalai Lama.

In Tibetan, *rang* means "self" and *tong* means empty. The "empty-of-self" (rangtong) view is understanding that all relative, impermanent, and composite phenomena, including beings and persons, that come together as a result of karma, causes, and conditions are "empty-of-self," empty of an inherent identity.

The "empty-of-other" (zhentong) view, on the other hand, is that the primordial nature or ultimate reality, the primordial awareness (*jhana* in Sanskrit), realizes that all phenomena are "empty-of-other." (In Tibetan, *zhen* means "other.") "Other" here means all conditioned, impermanent phenomena, dualism, and conceptuality. However, buddha nature is not empty of itself. It is only empty of all of that.

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As Taranatha points out in his *Commentary on the Heart Sutra*, if the ultimate nature, primordial awareness, were “empty-of-self,” then what would the *Heart Sutra* possibly be referring to when it states “seeing the five psycho-physical aggregates as empty of inherent existence”? Who or what would see that? A proponent of the “empty-of-other” view would answer that primordial awareness sees that. Sounds obvious, right?

When refuting inherent existence, one understands or knows that there is no such thing as true existence. But thinking there is no such thing as true existence is also known conceptually. And so that also is a mental fabrication. Therefore, one needs to go beyond these four fabricated categories—truly existent, not truly existent, both, or neither—to emptiness, which is beyond words and beyond concepts. That is when you arrive at a nonconceptual cognition of emptiness. This is what they call the ultimate nature.

Now, the “empty-of-other” view, or the buddha nature view, agrees with this but says that it is not enough. There is something more there remaining than just nonconceptual experience of emptiness. There are the buddha nature qualities of infinite love, infinite compassion, great bliss, and so on, spoken about in the *Tathagatagarbha Sutras*, the *Buddha Nature Sutras*. These are not empty of themselves and exist beyond conditions of karma and duality.

Hence the mantra *om gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha*, “Gone, gone, gone beyond, gone completely beyond.” Gone beyond what? Beyond suffering, beyond conditions, beyond duality, and beyond change.

According to “empty-of-other” proponents, the “empty-of-self” view incorrectly conflates the ultimate nature primordial awareness as being the same as a reified consciousness of the Mind Only view. However, from the “empty-of-other” perspective, the ultimate nature, primordial awareness (also called the union of great bliss and emptiness endowed with all aspects), abides outside of any dualistic appearances or conventional labels. It is the buddha nature (Skt.

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tathagatagarbha) itself and has been such since beginningless time. Thus, it is permanent, it is not consciousness in terms of being an impermanent and composite phenomena, and it does not appear to dualistic consciousness either. It is the primal source of great bliss, wisdom, love, and compassion within one's (currently obscured) psychophysical aggregates, which appear to primordial awareness.

That is why we naturally seek these qualities and feel healthier and happier when they are more present within us and others. However, it is not a case of those qualities being outside oneself but of those qualities being an inherent part of our ultimate nature, which we mistakenly seek to replicate outside. However, it is only when such innate qualities are revealed and allowed to shine by eliminating the obscuring afflictive emotions and mind states that the external appearances themselves will automatically begin to reflect that inner state. As the Kalachakra Tantra famously says, "As it is within, so, it is without."

4) Avoiding the Extremes: The Benefit of Understanding Both Views for Everyday Life and Practice

That is the debate between the two views and some of the differences between them. Can this debate actually be resolved? "Empty-of-self" proponents are criticized by "empty-of-other" proponents as advocating for some kind of nothingness, nihilistic voidness, which ignores the buddha nature qualities of mind and reality. However, even some "empty-of-self" scholars do admit that such an idea is not alien but that it is termed differently. They speak about the clear light as being the deepest truth, which is in terms of both its way of existing and the subtlest mind. But that certainly isn't in the sutra presentation, and they don't call it "empty-of-other."

Thus, proponents of the "empty-of-other" view see the minds of the people we are associated with—our friends, our enemies, and all sentient beings—as being the same in essence: luminosity

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or bliss-emptiness. We know that every single sentient being's nature of mind is clear luminosity, the enlightened heart that is the buddha nature.

In the nature of mind there is no stain. There is not the slightest conceptual fabrication in the mind's true nature, and that is why the mind is known as "empty-of-other," *zhentong*. Since that ineffable nature of mind of every single sentient being is clear light and since the essence of this clear light is free of the slightest stain that arises due to dualistic fixations and mental constructs, one can develop the vast understanding that the one who apprehends (the subject) and what is apprehended (object) have the same essence. Knowing this enables practitioners to develop inconceivable compassion and a pure vision of reality. Knowing that relative appearances are "empty-of-self" and knowing that the mind's true nature is "empty-of-other," a sincere practitioner no longer slips into garments that are extreme views about arising or cessation.

Seeing that all phenomena that can be apprehended are empty of their own essence, one no longer clings to the extreme of permanence. Seeing that the mind's true nature is replete with many invaluable qualities that manifests spontaneously and naturally, one no longer clings to the extreme of nihilism or cessation. Since all relative phenomena that appear are empty of any inherent self or identity, one can conclude that the mind that apprehends and conceives relative appearances is also empty of an identity. Since the mind's true nature transcends what can be accomplished, affirmed, or refuted, then what one thinks must be accomplished and what one thinks must be abandoned are always and already pure and free.

5) Different Teachings for Different People: the Definitive and Provisional Meanings

For centuries, Indian and Tibetan scholars have been concerned with resolving these apparently conflicting notions about the meaning of emptiness, in particular, its relationship or identity with the Buddhist teachings on the ultimate or the buddha nature. So, why are there these philosophical differences in view? One answer lies in Taranatha's text called *Twenty-One*

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Differences: that these minor differences arise during the ascertainment of the provisional but not the definitive view

Do not think that there are contradictions in the intention among those who see the profound reality. They speak differently to different disciples due to perceiving different trainees and needs.

Taranatha is referring to a distinction that is made between what is called a definitive meaning teaching (*nges don*) that is focused on the Third Wheel Turning teachings on buddha nature, whereas *rangtong* (“empty-of-self”) is a provisional teaching (*drang don*) focused on the Second Wheel Turning of teachings, such as the perfection of insight in the Prajnaparamita Sutras.

Generally, “definitive meaning,” means a teaching that requires no interpretation and teaches the ultimate view, whereas a “provisional meaning” teaching is one that requires interpretation and is not teaching the ultimate view. However, as I’ve shown here, Taranatha, Dolpopa, and other “empty-of-other” proponents assert that in the Second Wheel Turning teachings in the Prajnaparamita Sutras, it is also teaching the definitive view. Now, there is some truth in this dual categorization, but it is a little bit more complicated than that.

6) What is the relevance and meaning of this for everyday life and practice?

What does this all mean for everyday life and meditative practice? Do such debates have any real importance or relevance outside of debate ground? From a general perspective, holding the “correct view” is an important part of daily life and practice. In order that a practitioner does not become attached to and cling to people and phenomenon, the “empty-of-self” view reminds a person that all is impermanent, conditioned, and without any stable identity. So that a practitioner has not been fooled into thinking nothing exists at all and the ensuing nihilism or negation and possible depression from that, the “empty-of-other” or buddha nature view reminds one that the

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ultimate nature of mind and reality is infinitely full of amazing, enlightened buddha qualities of infinite love, compassion, and wisdom. The fact that other people, whatever they might do and think, share that same nature of mind also means that we do not forget that all individuals, even those whom we perceive as bad, still have the potential within them to attain full awakening. They are not completely helpless or innately bad. Their minds are perhaps covered more with afflictions and ignorance due to past karmic actions and habits.

From a Vajrayana practitioner perspective, for example, according to Taranatha, Kalachakra is Tantric Zhentong. It is tantric “empty-of-other.” So without knowing what that correct Zhentong view is, it will be almost impossible to practice the Kalachakra completion stage, which requires both the correct conceptual and nonconceptual understanding of emptiness. As Jonang Thubten Bamda Gelek says in his commentary on the Kalachakra practice, *The Chariot that Transports to the Kingdom of the Four Kayas*, which was translated and published in 2019, says:

The primordial awareness realizing emptiness, which is free of the mental elaborations of clinging to reality and things as inherently existing, is alone not the completion stage, as it is similar to the primordial awareness that arises from bringing the karmic winds into the central channel. In order to accomplish the actual completion stage, one needs to realize the view for entering the completion stage. If one doesn't realize it [the view], even if one practices the completion stage, the signs [of experience] will not arise in one's mindstream.

The great Karma Kagyu yogi Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche also states in his book, *Progressive Stages on Meditation on Emptiness*, which progressively follows the stages of meditating on the lower to higher views of reality, that in terms of the philosophical view, the two views are significantly different, and that one needs to realize the “empty-of-self” view to realize the “empty-of-other” view. However, in terms of meditation practice, the view of “empty-of-other” and “mind-only” are very close and quite difficult to distinguish. For

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completion and generation stage of practices of Vajrayana, at the very least a conceptually correct view of both views of emptiness is essential.

So, where does that leave the person who, having listened to this, wants to understand a little more about these two views and the differences between them without engaging in years of intensive debate and study? Well, there are a few excellent books and online articles out there that one can read, some of which I've already mentioned.

This is a simple and nonacademic introduction to the two views of emptiness, and there are subtle differences between the different lineages in terms of their interpretations of it. However, the takeaway from this is that at any time of the day or night, we can turn inwards and generate the mental states of love, compassion, and wisdom and thus reveal our eternally present buddha nature like a loving mother in our heart, always there shining like a golden sun, whether there are clouds or not, warm, kind, glowing, and shining on all without expectation. With the two views of emptiness, one can fly like a bird in the sky, not falling into the hard ground of nihilism, but also not getting lost in the eternal heavens, enjoying both in equal measure, sweeping up to the blissful buddha nature when things get too depressing or downhearted and swooping down to stay close to the truth of suffering and delusion, not getting wrapped up and lost in hedonism and pleasure.

7) Short Analytical Meditation on the Two Views

To end the talk, I will do a very short analytical meditation on the two views of emptiness to give a brief taste of the dharmakaya bliss buddha nature that is “empty-of-other.”

First, let us meditate on the “empty-of-self” view. Close your eyes and bring to mind all the people you have known who are sick or who have passed away, how nothing lasts and everything is continually decaying.

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Then bring to mind how there is so much suffering in the world caused by negative thoughts and intentions such as greed, anger, hatred, jealousy, selfishness, and so on.

Reflect on how even people who are very wealthy, physically beautiful, and so on still experience the suffering of old age, sickness, and death.

Remember how internal happiness and satisfaction thus cannot be found outside in such conditioned impermanent phenomena or beings.

Now, we will move onto the “empty-of-ether” view and buddha nature. Bring to mind people or activities or even food that you really love and care about. Bring to mind the most blissful experience you have had. Reflect on how every being you know wants to feel happy, blissful, satisfied, and loved. For example, remember how it felt looking at a beautiful sunset, beach, ocean, mountain, or flower or even falling in love. That peaceful state of mind free of concepts, relaxed and at ease in the moment. Remain in that state for a short time.

Reflect on how wonderful it would be if all beings could feel that sense of bliss, ease, and ecstasy and beneficial and positive mental states. Reflect that such a state is not dependent on outside phenomena but can be generated and found within.

This short meditation is to give you a brief taste of the difference in focus between the “empty-of-self” and “empty-of-other” view. As you can hear, the “empty-of-self” view focuses more on the impermanent, conditioned nature of phenomena and beings in samsara, how nothing lasts and everything causes suffering due to clinging onto self and other and identities. The “empty-of-other” view, on the other hand, focuses within on the buddha nature qualities such as infinite love, compassion, joy, wisdom, bliss, and so on. These qualities are unconditioned and eternally present in the nature of mind and reality. Thus they are seen as unchanging and

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spontaneously present at all times. These inherent qualities are what unite all beings rather than separate us.

So it is with that meditation that I end this talk. May it be of benefit, and may it help us all attain the fully awakened state of Buddha, the bliss-emptiness *dharmakaya*.