

Śāntarakṣita on veridical perception

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Abstract. Śāntarakṣita, an 8th century Indian Buddhist philosopher, united the Cittamātra and the Madhyamaka views into a single system. Consistently following Nāgārjuna, from the point of view of absolute reality he proclaimed all things to be empty and beyond conception. From the point of view of the conventional, he stated that we should understand everything as awareness. Nevertheless, when analysing Cittamātra views on perception, he found them all to be inadequate.

Buddhism is usually described as based on two pillars, direct experience and inference. Given Śāntarakṣita's sharp critique of the veracity of perception, upon which inductive premises are based, how are we to make sense of knowledge on the conventional level? I will attempt to answer this question through an analysis of the ideas of the 11th century philosopher Rongzom and the 19th century philosopher Mipham. I will also show the relevance of Śāntarakṣita's critique of perception today, by comparing it with contemporary Western cognitive science.

Śāntarakṣita has been described as the Kant of the East. Like Kant, he carefully considered all the views on knowledge and reality current in his day, and created a consistent synthesis of the most promising ones. True, he was never awakened from a dogmatic slumber as Kant was awakened by Hume. He seems to have been born into his philosophic position, and there is no evidence that his views ever underwent significant change. But substantive similarities are there. Both philosophers understand the world in terms of predispositions to understand phenomena in certain ways, for Kant in terms of categories such as space, time, number and object and for Śāntarakṣita in terms of habitual tendencies, reborn in place at the time of birth.

Although it is difficult to be precise about Bengali history in the 7th and 8th centuries, it is usually believed that Śāntarakṣita was living in Bengal around that time and was associated with the Gopala Dynasty. Bengal at that time was subject to Tibetan raids, and so there were probably Tibetan cultural influences. Bengal was a centre of Mahāyāna Buddhist studies, specifically Vajrayāna. There is some evidence that a view similar to Dzogchen or Ati Yoga was taught in the monasteries and that this may have influenced some of the songs and dance of the region, significant because music and dance were an integral part of Śāntarakṣita's tantric philosophy.

At some time in the 8th century, Śāntarakṣita entered the university monastery of Nālandā in northern India, described by Bhattacharya as the 'Oxford of the East'. This seat of learning had very high standards, and it was necessary to pass a rigorous exam to be admitted. The Chinese pilgrim Huan Tsang described it as follows:

After making every allowance for oriental exaggeration, it is evident that the Sangharama at Nālandā must have been the most magnificent university in the eastern world. If the bare statement may be accepted that ten thousand monks and novices were lodged within the walls, an idea of vastness is found which can hardly be realized. It may, however, be remarked that the site was regarded as the holiest in all Magadha. ... Again, the institution had not been founded by a single king, but had been enlarged, embellished, and endowed at intervals by a succession of pious sovereigns, extending possibly over a period of nine centuries from Aśoka downwards. Towers, domes and pavilions rose above a paradise of shady trees, secluded gardens, and sparkling fountains. There were six large blocks of buildings four stories high, in which inmates were lodged. There were a hundred lecture rooms in different branches of study. There were other large halls for conferences. The whole was distributed in eight courts. Every necessary was gratuitously supplied to the ten thousand inmates, including vestments and medicines as well as lodging and board.

In this splendid retreat, far away from the busy turmoil of the court and capital, the monks and novices pursued their daily studies without cares and without distractions. The university was renowned not only for its buildings and gardens, but for the learning of its pupils, and the high intellectual caliber of its masters. The monks in general belonged to the great Vehicle; but all the eighteen sects of Buddhism were represented within the walls; and besides the religious books all the sciences were studied, even medicine and arithmetic. (Wheeler 1977, 270–71)

Nālandā monastery was known for its broad scope, and all branches of Buddhist and non-Buddhist philosophy were taught and debated there. Śāntarakṣita had a superb knowledge of both the orthodox and non-orthodox schools of Indian philosophy. He discusses all of them in his writings and presents their arguments fairly and accurately. Śāntarakṣita's ideas about perception are discussed in both the *Tattvasaṅgraha* (*TS*) and the *Madhyamakālaṅkāra* (*MA*), but since the latter is more concise, I will concentrate on that.

Śāntarakṣita's views on perception are clearly encapsulated in *The Ornament of the Middle Way*, (*Madhyamakālaṅkāra*) and its auto-commentary *Madhyamakālaṅkāravṛtti* (*MAV*). (According to Je Tsong Khapa, the *MA* and the auto-commentary, *MAV*, were originally one work, because only the *vṛtti* contains the homage to Manjushri that would have been included in every classic Mahāyāna *abhidharma* text.)

My goal in this paper is to answer the question as to why Śāntarakṣita spends such a great amount of time refuting the views of the early Buddhist schools (atomist) and the Cittamātra (idealist) schools on perception, and in doing so, to show Śāntarakṣita's understanding of the importance of appearances in reaching enlightenment, while at the same time rejecting both matter and mind as having inherent existence.

To analyse Śāntarakṣita's views on perception, it is useful to place them in the broader context of his argument throughout the work. The key to the argument lies in Śāntarakṣita's concern with the mereological notions of one and many. These are mutually exclusive and exhaustive as applied to everything. This being the case, if

one can show that something cannot be considered as either one or many, then it cannot possibly exist.

Śāntarakṣita applies this method in analysing material substance. The material universe could not be considered one single undifferentiated unity, because then it could never change. Nor could it be considered as being composed of many indivisible parts (atoms as understood by the Greeks and others in ancient times). For if the parts are indivisible, they cannot have sides and thus could not combine to make larger objects.

Having disposed of atoms, Śāntarakṣita turns to awareness, which cannot be denied without using the same awareness one is trying to deny. Self-awareness [Tib. *Rang rig*, Skr. *sva-samvedana*] accompanies every cognition. This is easily misunderstood. As James Blumenthal has recently pointed out, the generally accepted mistake in interpretation was begun by Je Tsong Khapa's Geluk disciple, Gyel Tsab, who claimed Śāntarakṣita was asserting the existence of a substantially existing self:

On the issue of self=cognizing cognition, it appears that the Geluk critique is aimed at the way that position is held by Yogācāras, rather than the specific way it is asserted by Śāntarakṣita. (Blumenthal 2004, 181)

In turn, the great nineteenth century scholar Mipham Gyatso (Mi-pham-rgya-tsho) (1846–1912) has defended Śāntarakṣita's position in his commentary *dbU Ma rgyan gyi rnam bshad 'jam dbyangs bla ma dgyes pa'I zhal lung* with full knowledge of the arguments put forward by Prasaṅgika scholars such as Candrakīrti and Śāntideva. He argues that even their rejections of the concepts are only a rejection of its ultimate existence and not that self cognizing cognition is not a viable concept for conventional understanding. (Ibid., 223)

Śāntarakṣita was only saying that at every moment of awareness of an object there is the understanding that this is one's own experience. The traditional analysis of action in terms of subject, object and activity do not apply in the case of self-awareness, because the self is not an object about which one is aware.

17. Because its nature is unique and partless,
It is impossible for it to have a threefold nature.
Therefore self-awareness does not have
The property of subject and object. (MA)

[The early philosophers say] the object of self is able to establish its own aspect. It is a cause and can elicit knowledge of its own form. And consciousness of the nature of the stipulated object is produced. Thus the knower, the known, and the manner of knowing together are produced by the object which is said to be like this in its own nature. But self-awareness cannot be established as an object in this way, because this consciousness ... is not the producer, the producing, and what is produced. In this manner, the knower, the knowing and known are not different modes of awareness perceived in the threefold way. It is not perceived in this manner. (MAV)

But although self-awareness is not awareness of itself as an object, how are we to characterise awareness of objects? What is one aware of and how is one aware?

Again Śāntarakṣita turns to the dichotomy between one and many. Awareness must either be one with its object, or distinct from it. Śāntarakṣita first addresses the issue of veridical perception with relation to the two early Buddhist philosophical schools, the Vaibhāṣika and the Sautrāntika, that believe that subject and object are distinct.

These choices, namely that subject and object are either the same or distinct, represent two forms of the Cittamātra philosophical schools. Those who believe subject and object to be the same are called False Aspectarians (*sems tsam rnam dzunpa*). Those who believe subject and object are distinct are called True Aspectarians (*sems tsam rnam bdenpa*). There are three sub-schools that hold the True Aspectarian tradition. They have their counterparts in early Buddhist philosophy as well; the difference is that in the early Buddhist schools the aspects are material objects, while in the Cittamātra schools, the aspects are mental objects. Śāntarakṣita takes aim at all these views. His purpose in so doing is to show that if perception must take place in the present (we cannot perceive the past or future), then all possible models of perception, whether of a material object or a mental one, are incoherent.

It is important to understand that, following Nāgārjuna, Śāntarakṣita understands the present moment to be indivisible. Any duration of a positive length can be divided onto the previous, present and future instant. So the present moment has a duration of zero. If perception must take place in the present, then there is not enough time for the mind to apprehend the subject. All Śāntarakṣita's attacks on the theories of perception of the various philosophical schools are based on this.

Critique of the early Buddhist theories of perception

Śāntarakṣita first aims his critique at the Vaibhāṣikas. The Vaibhāṣika were naïve realists, who believed that we had direct knowledge of the object of perception, which was composed of atoms. The object of perception is not only distinguishable but also separable from the mind. Śāntarakṣita argues against this view for the following reason.

21. For those who do not assert that consciousness
 Is transformed by the aspect of the object,
 Then (in their system), there would be no knowledge
 Of the existence of the external object. (*MA*; quoted in *MAV*)

Because the object of knowledge is by nature unknowable, one's object of awareness is distanced from the object itself. It is not correct to attach a label if one does not accept the reflection that is caused by the relationship. If this is so, it is not correct to say that the object in itself can correlate with consciousness. This cannot be the case. (*MAV*)

Śāntarakṣita concentrates his critique of the early Buddhist theories of perception on that of the Sautrāntikas. The Sautrāntikas, like the Vaibhāṣikas believed that the material world was composed of atoms. But while the Vaibhāṣikas believed that the

senses directly perceived the material object, the Sautrāntikas believed that what is apprehended is a mental mirage-like object generated in the mind through the interaction of the atoms in the object and the atoms in the sense organs. There were three sub-schools of this Early Buddhist view. The first held that one single unified state of knowledge apprehended the object as a single unified object, with all its diversity apprehended as a unity: Śāntarakṣita rejects this:

22. [If you claim] one cognition is not many, then

There cannot be many images.
But then the view of mind as a unity,
Has no power to establish many objects. (*MA*)

Because consciousness is not distinct,
Not becoming other than the object,
If this is so, by the power of that,
One cannot have knowledge of the object. (*TS* 2036)

In a consciousness which perceives a single painting unfurled etc. without doubt representations originate equal to aspects, such as blue, yellow which are gathered together within range. If so, a single cognition will not correspond to a plurality. This could not be said to be established. (*MAV*)

The second Early Buddhist view considers there to be many aspects of mind that match the aspects of the perceived object:

31. If you say when one sees the surface of a drawing, since there are many aspects,
There are as many thoughts (in a single moment) as there are parts to the painting.
In what way could this happen through one (mental state) alone?
This is how such mental states arise together. (*MA*)

But then [Śāntarakṣita replies]:

32. In that case, how could whiteness and so forth, which are known in a single way,
Have a great number of parts, such as a top, middle and bottom?
Each of these would have to become distinct objects of knowledge,
Which is impossible. (*MA*; quoted in *MAV*)

Thus similarly, [patches of] blue and white, etc., are compound objects. They are asserted (by opponents) to be one, but they have opposite sides and a great number of parts. Thus knowledge of this manifold must be diversified. Thus having asserted a manifold, if in that case one claims to grasp only a small particle without branches (indivisible), then in that case, having distinguished with certainty the (smallest postulated) divisions of each of the aspects of these branches of the object, this cannot be perceived even by those with very subtle insight.

This sort of perception cannot be experienced. (*MAV*)

33. A bit of white etc., atomic in nature
In itself, single and partless,
Which appears to anyone's consciousness,
I do not feel exists. (*MA*)

This position dovetails nicely with the view current in brain science that there is a part of the brain that recognises shapes, recognises colours, etc. (read mind for brain). Śāntarakṣita questions how this could result in knowledge of a unified object. This problem has not been solved by brain scientists today.

The third view holds that at each moment of time one state of mind at a time apprehends an aspect of an object, but this happens so quickly that it seems simultaneous. It is known as the half egg theory because one thinks of each moment of perception as the unity of mental subject and material object in the same way as the parts of a hard boiled egg sliced in half, in contact, form a unity.

24. [You say] perception of white and so forth
Have arisen gradually.
Because they arise quickly, foolish people
Think they know them simultaneously. (MA)

The gradual arising of thought
Is like a firebrand whirled around
Because of the speed
It appears in the mind simultaneously. (TS 124)

Similarly, [they say] as when piercing the one hundred petals of the utpala flower, one can say one knows a single object gradually but quickly, just as one 'sees' the circle of fire. Because one sees it quickly, one says one sees a single circle of fire. (MAV)

Today we would say that the brain produces an afterimage that results from many sequential impressions.

If this is so [Śāntarakṣita replies],

25. The sound of the word 'vine' (*lata*),
Arises very quickly.
If [the syllables] were perceived simultaneously,
Then why would not [the syllables] be heard simultaneously (also *tala*). (MA; quoted in MAV)

Through the aspect of the sound, the word 'vine'
Similarly arises very quickly by the operation of the mind.
By the precision of simultaneity
How would not the reverse arise?

Lata (vine) and *tala* (palm tree), *sara* (lake) and *rasa* (flavor) etc., as they are called, when one investigates these objects, these letters (syllables). One sees similarly that they arise very quickly. Thus because they arise quickly, they cannot be known (veridically perceived), because how could they be simultaneous like a single drawing? (We could not distinguish between *tala* and *lata* if they seemed to appear simultaneously. Similarly with blue and yellow, if arising quickly and perceived as if simultaneous, the picture would be mixed up.) Similarly, if the cause and effect are distinct, the causal sequence cannot be said to result in perception (because there would be no discernible pattern, given the half egg presuppositions). (MAV)

Mipham has a very clear explanation of this point:

With regard to the impression of instantaneous completion arising from the rapid, successive cognition by the mind of the syllabic components of the word *lata* which means a twig, and *tala*, which is the name of a kind of tree, the difference between the first syllable of the word *lata* and the first syllable of the word *tala* (in the order of syllables) is annihilated. (Mipham 2005, 210–1)

Further, the perceptual process cannot be gradual, because perception is understood as taking place only in the present instant:

As previously conclusively explained, because the cause [no longer] exists.
It is not correct that one sees the circle of fire.

28. A firebrand whirled about once
Appears [deceptively] as a wheel.
Although it appears clearly,
It cannot be connected by perception [because perception must be in the present moment].
(MA)

The position that the perception is produced by memory:

29. In that way (they say), the joining of the boundaries
Is done by memory [not perception].
Because there is no perception of the past,
There is no perception of the object [the circle]. (MA; quoted in MAV)

The rejection of this position:

[They say], memory is what connects the boundaries, which produces an object, because perception does not apprehend (*zin*) it and has no ability to make connections. What is the consequence of this? (MAV)

Śāntarakṣita considers the possibility that the rapid apprehension of aspects produces a memory. He denies this is possible, because the experience of the circle of fire, for example, is very bright, not like a memory that is not so vivid:

Similarly, memory does not perceive clearly a substance which is in front of it. Understood in this way, similarly, it is correct to say that the circle made by the firebrand itself ought to be seen. The firebrand which appears so clearly, really appears. [It is not controlled by memory, because it is clear.] (MAV 30)

The Cittamātra views of perception

Having dismissed all three of the early school theories of perception, Śāntarakṣita turns his attention to the Cittamātra views. (According to Mipham Rinpoche, this is the preferred view of Dharmakīrti) (Mipham 2005, 101).

Let us consider the True Aspectarian view first, that is the view that subject and object, albeit that they are both mental, are different from each other. The first sub-school is called *gzung 'dzin grangs mnyam pa*, or equal numbers of subjects and objects. If we remember that Śāntarakṣita never mentions the brain as the seat of the mind, probably unknown at his time, nevertheless, this view bears a striking resemblance to modern ideas in cognitive science. Today we know that certain parts of the brain 'tell' us about shapes, others about colours, etc. According to this view, each of the features of the mind apprehends a separate feature of the object in a single present instant. This Cittamātra view understood the external object as mental.

Śāntarakṣita argues that whether material or mental, the object is infinitely divisible into separate features. To hold that in a single present instant the parts of the mind are able to apprehend this infinite display is absurd:

49. If according to the number of reflected features,

One accepts states of consciousness

Then (states of) consciousness would be as numerous as the atoms,

This analysis would be difficult to circumvent. [Features like blue are accepted as atomic].
(MA; quoted in MAV)

If the atom with no space in between, by nature is non-existent, then if all the many consciousnesses are similarly without anything in between at a time, then the same analysis we have performed in relation to the atoms will be true of these consciousnesses.

Similarly if one asserts that aspects of consciousness are similar to partless particles surrounded by other particles, then what could be the nature of a partless aspect that faces one aspect and is to the other side of another?

Without consciousness holding many similar atoms without gap, then it will be mistaken as a single gross lump. What particulars are here? Blue and so forth appears without gap. If some people accept this as atomic, then it will not be beyond the same fault [as found with atoms]. (MAV)

Nor does Śāntarakṣita accept the view that one mental state grasps instantaneously all the various aspects of the object.

Thus [their view] is that consciousness, like the onyx, (is but one, but) appears variegated. This cannot be accepted in the way spoken of in this doubtful system. (MAV)

50. Multiplicity cannot have the characteristics of one,

Similar to the way a multifaceted jewel is not one. (MA; quoted in MAV)

...

This variety of aspects should be made of distinct features. If this is actually so, then this contradicts the nature of oneness. Thus many of these objects have the nature of oneness. As much as there are features, there are that many natures. Having different characteristics means being different things. (MAV)

51. But if one [a Cittamātra] holds that a manifold's true nature is single

But appears to have a multiple nature

How could these many qualities happen?

Such as veiled or unveiled and so forth. (MA; quoted in MAV)

If jewels like the agate had an intrinsic self nature mixed into one, then this would contradict the variety of aspects that appear. The self-nature of the objects [as they appear] is no illusion. Otherwise the various aspects of the jewel would be identical. If one were hidden, all would be hidden. Similarly all realizations would become one state of mind. (MAV)

Thus Śāntarakṣita rejects the Cittamātra version of the half egg position as well, but not for the same reasons that he rejects the Sautrāntika half egg theory. As explained to me by Khenchen Palden Sherab Rinpoche, the Sautrāntikas are speaking of the unity of mental states with material objects. Since the two states are different in nature, it makes sense to speak of them as coming together. But to say that the mind comes together with part of itself, and to say that the two parts are different, would involve one in a contradiction.

46. If the external aspects are real,
 Consciousness would become a manifold,
 Or [these aspects] would become one.
 This [conclusion] is difficult to avoid.
 The following view is also flawed. (MA; quoted in MAV)
 If the object is not completely distinct [from consciousness] and is the same in nature to consciousness, than if the object is a manifold, consciousness must also be a manifold. Or if consciousness is one, then it would be difficult to avoid the conclusion that the objects of consciousness must also be a singularity [rather than a manifold]. Since these phenomena are ultimately opposite in nature, from the ultimate point of view, consciousness and its objects must really be different. (MAV)

Mentioning further mistakes:

47. If the aspects are not different,
 Then [concerning] moving and not moving (opposites) and so forth,
 If one is moving, all would move.
 This would be an absurdity difficult to answer. (MA; quoted in MAV)
 Not different, means it will be shown it is one. But if this is the case, then why wouldn't one grasp that all objects move with a single motion? If one thing is yellow, everything would become yellow etc. This theory about aspects and their attributes similarly is shown to be absurd. (MAV)
48. Also in the case of any doctrine that objects exist externally,
 If the aspects are not separate,
 All phenomena would be one.
 It's unavoidable. (MA; quoted in MAV)
 If those things remaining in the phenomenal world are contradictory/not harmonious/heterogeneous, then they will be different and distinct. They say that two minds do not arise from both former and later moments, but only as a single (simultaneous) mental state. [But I argue] these are happening as opposite types. [All are like waves of water.] It is not logical that two (opposite) minds come together simultaneously, a contradiction difficult to remove. These are done by the power of ripening states of consciousness. If you say that two different minds are coming together, you are contradicting scripture. You cannot avoid this. (MAV)

Finally let us turn to the view of the False Aspectarians, those who believe that appearances are one with the subject.

52. If they believe the perception of forms is in error,
 And that forms do not exist independently.
 This is because forms do not exist on the ultimate level.
 Therefore the perception of forms is a mistake. (*MA*; quoted in *MAV*)
 As to consciousness, from the ultimate point of view, it is like a pure crystal. Clearly, what they say is incorrect. Thus said.
 If ultimately forms are consciousness like a pure crystal etc, distinct aspects such as blue would not exist. Likewise from beginningless time under the power of ripening erroneous habitual tendencies, the eye is confused by mantras etc to see pieces of clay as elephants and horses. (*MAV*)

Śāntarakṣita continues:

53. But how could it be that [forms] do not exist [apart from mind]
 When we clearly perceive
 That they are different from one another,
 And [according to this Cittamātra view] knowledge is not like this?
 Clearly this knowledge is not appropriate. Why is this so? (*MA*)
54. Since there is no thing
 There cannot be any knowledge of that.
 Just as there is no pleasure in what is unpleasant,
 And no white in what is not white. (*MA*)
55. In such a way there is no appropriate meaning to knowledge
 Because it lacks the self nature of knowledge
 Since in themselves, these aspects do not exist.
 Anymore than a sky flower and so forth, could. (*MA*)
57. Because how would the experienced characteristic
 Be related to knowledge?
 Being non-existent it is not knowledge,
 And also could not arise (in consciousness). (*MA*)

Thus the self nature of knowledge is non-existent. If the features do not exist, consciousness does not exist since they are the same. Knowledge cannot arise from what is non-existent in nature, because the arising would be produced from what is non-existent in nature. If it arises it must exist from what is previous and then the result is subsequent. If so, it is not simultaneous and thus cannot be the same as the knowledge. (*MAV*; cf. Blumenthal 2004, 131)

Also, knowledge at the same time would be of an imaginary object.

58. If there is no cause whatsoever, one cannot
 Explain why [aspects] arise occasionally.
 If there is a cause,
 The mind cannot avoid being controlled by others. (*MA*; quoted in *MAV*)

Because [if as you say] the aspect/image does not exist, it is uncaused. If there is no cause, it is not possible [for changes] to arise occasionally. They could not be apprehended. If you proclaim this mistake about the arising of causes and conditions, then [this is to proclaim] the mistake that something comes from nothing. If one mistakenly accepts this, then if there is no interdependent origination; these aspects cannot arise from the power of another. If it does not rely on the power of another, it cannot come into existence. To exist is to arise from conditions. There is no other way.

[If there is nothing that exists separately (from consciousness)], then there is nothing that has the power to arise from what is non-existent. There is nothing in existence that does not arise from the power of causal conditions [the twelve links].

Furthermore we say that it is a fault to accept a non-existent object. (MAV)

59. [If you say] the object does not exist, but only the mind

Without an object, developing by itself, then

Like a pure crystal glass,

Mind would not perceive at all. (MA; quoted in MAV)

If the nature of eye consciousness etc. is lacking the blue object etc. which is on a surface, if non-existent, like a pure crystal ball, it would not be a representation. If the external and internal aspect does not exist, there is nothing else which would have the power to produce an image. It would not exist moreover just as an illusion etc. do not exist. One must accept that this is a refutation. (MAV)

Śāntarakṣita concludes that a consciousness that is one with its object could not change. There must be an external cause that brings about successive states of awareness:

60. Then if you think all cognitions are illusory,

How is this illusion perceived?

If images arise in the mind by the power of this illusion,

Then it is still the power of another. (MA; quoted in MAV)

For example, the eye when afflicted with disease (jaundice) sees what does not exist through seeing the object such as a white conch as yellow, and similarly knowledge through the force of habitual tendencies, mistakenly will assert clearly the truth of the yellowness. The mistaken perception occurs through habitual tendencies. Should one think this way?

These arising characteristics are connected, because they arise as interdependent co-origination, and therefore this is due to the power of another. Others say that the accumulation of habits from beginningless time produces deluded states. If so, this is the power of another. If there are these arising characteristics then it is tendril, (interdependent origination). If the characteristics that arise are in combination, then that itself is interdependent co-origination. Therefore it is dependent on another power. This would be hard to refute. (MAV)

For Śāntarakṣita the causes of mental changes are the habitual tendencies maturing from beginningless time. (This accords with his belief in reincarnation.) But then Śāntarakṣita aims a fatal dart at the Cittamātra view, because these very causes, which he accepts as necessary to account for change, are nevertheless unreal, because the

cause and effect occur in different moments of time and hence will never come in contact. Following Nāgārjuna, he is thoroughly Madhyamaka.

So on the absolute level, all is beyond conception, beyond perception. On the conventional level, one apprehends the ordinary world through awareness. This awareness is 'programmed' by habitual tendencies from beginningless time. But emptiness is not a black hole, is not nothingness.

But there is a logical problem here. If emptiness is beyond conception, how can we speak meaningfully of it in terms of emptiness and compassion, the hallmarks of enlightenment? We cannot directly. But one could observe that the buddhas and high bodhisattvas, after realizing emptiness, spontaneously manifest great wisdom and compassion and appear very peaceful and happy. So it would seem that these states and not their opposites are connected with the ultimate.

Rongzom and the divine nature of appearances

Śāntarakṣita in his tantric text *Tattvasiddhi* argues that the happiness obtained from music, dance, and union with a consort, when enjoyed without grasping and dualistic conceptions, can produce enlightenment. If there were a difference in kind between appearance and emptiness, this would not be possible. From the absolute view, there cannot be a difference, for the nature of both is emptiness. If this is the case, then appearances themselves must be in an enlightened state. This is the very position taken by Rongzompa in his *Establishing Appearances as Divine*. He argues convincingly against some Madhyamaka philosophers who downgraded experiences and elevated the absolute. According to Rongzompa, if there is no duality, then appearances are equal to the absolute.

Madhamikas traditionally have distinguished between conventional understanding of the world of appearance and ultimate reality that transcends appearance as well as linguistic description. Śāntarakṣita argues that appearances, as well as space and time, cannot be ultimately real. To do this, he applies the method of one and many. Śāntarakṣita concludes that the ultimate must completely transcend all duality.

But what about the duality implicit in the distinction between the conventional and the absolute? This must also be overcome in order to experience enlightenment. But how?

In the *Tattvasiddhi*, Śāntarakṣita admits that there is no logical way to establish the possibility of experiencing the ultimate. But he does believe that through logic one can show that it is possible. He bases this on the inseparability of the ultimate with appearances and the way in which causality functions on the relative level. Even though there is no logical way to establish the connection between cause and effect, nevertheless we know from experience that certain results follow certain preceding conditions and not others. Planting an acorn may well be followed by an oak, but

not by a rose bush. There are also ways of altering conditions in such a way as to produce special results. For example, a certain kind of tree, the *syu ru ra*, produces sour fruit. But if the seed is soaked in milk or molasses before it is planted, the tree that follows from that seed will have fruit that is sweet. Śāntarakṣita argues that worldly enjoyments that are experienced without duality and grasping will produce the experience of enlightenment.

Śāntarakṣita argues that those who believe the experience of enlightenment is produced through harsh ascetic practice are wrong because similar causes produce similar effects. Since the acorn is similar to the oak but not to the rose tree, it will not produce a rose tree.

Rongzom has a similar argument. If the ultimate is non-dual, and if all appearances are ultimately empty, then there is no difference between the ultimate, or enlightenment, and appearances. Rongzom explicitly attacks those Madhyamikas who condemn appearances as impure. For Rongzom all appearances are divine, that is, they are pure because they are already in the enlightened state.

Appearances of course are mental, so how can they be considered in the purity/enlightenment state? Śāntarakṣita's defence of the mental nature of the conventional provides the answer. Appearances are not the result of perception. Strictly speaking, nothing is ever perceived. Appearances are generated by maturing habitual tendencies (modern cognitive scientists may read 'programming' here). As Rongzom explains:

One might wonder how the habitual tendencies cause these [appearances] to appear. [First of all] there is the habitual tendency of the two types of apprehending which manifest as object and subject. ... Furthermore, the habitual tendency of believing in a self causes oneself and the divine continuum to appear different from each other and causes a raw split between [oneself and] the objects. The habitual tendency of full expression creates the appearance of different attributes. The habitual tendency of the links of existence creates the appearance of the nature of birth, yet the exhaustion of all habitual tendencies without exception will not bring about the appearance of the utterly pure field of experience. One may, likewise, examine whether the mundane wisdom of pure enlightenment is existent or nonexistent, but [in fact] it is an inconceivable quality. (Rongzom 2008, 106)

Thus the elimination of habitual tendencies could not bring about liberation, because they are just that which is established as divine. But how can these appearances be both mind and divine/ultimate reality? Rongzom explains this by analogy with a reflection in a mirror:

The deity of complete purity can be set forth in two ways. A reflection in a mirror may, by virtue of being a quality of the mirror, be said to pertain to the mirror, and by virtue of being the reflection of one's face, it may be said to pertain to the face. Likewise the appearances of divine body, speech and mind are perceived by the power of realizing the intrinsic nature by wisdom and by the force of compassion and aspiration prayers. Therefore they are distinguished by wisdom and the intrinsic nature. The divine appearances are, however,

also the appearances of the features of the mind and its habitual tendencies, and therefore they also come down to [simply] mind. (Ibid.)

What then are we to make of notions such as the path, view, meditation and action? Strictly speaking none of these make sense from an ultimate point of view, as Longchenpa pointed out. If all is a manifestation, how can one follow a path, since there is no distinction between the path and the non-path? How can one meditate if there is no difference between meditation and post-meditation? How can one do anything at all, if there is no doer? How can there be a view? For there is no distinction between the viewer and what is viewed.

These are difficult questions and beyond the scope of this short paper. My own way of making sense of them is as follows.

Establishing appearances into the divine requires a perspectival shift. This shift is different than that involved in Wittgenstein's switch from seeing a drawing as a duck to seeing it as a rabbit. In that case there is a subject that is seeing the object differently. What would it be like to achieve a total perspectival shift that dissolved the distinction between subject and object, that did not involve grasping at the object, and that was perfectly selfless? And how would it be possible?

We cannot say what it would be like without achieving enlightenment, or at least a high degree of realisation. But if appearances are divine, they themselves should provide the clue as to why this happens. Buddha's teachings are appearances. So are the teachings of the enlightened ones. So is everything. Heidi Koppl notices an apparent contradiction in Rongzom's position. He argues that all appearances are pure, yet rejects the duality between pure and impure:

Notwithstanding his commitment to purity, Rongzom here appears to relinquish the notion of both pure and impure appearances. We might interpret his statement as implying an Atiyoga perspective where, due to the fact of primordial purity (*ka dag*), any conditioned appearance of purity as perceived on the path is still an adventitious experience and thus not the actualization of the primordial condition (*gdod ma'I gnas lugs*). (Ibid., 160, n. 272)

Now what does Koppl mean by 'adventitious'? It can mean not inherent, extrinsic, accidental, among others. I think she means 'not inherent'. Then the actualisation of the primordial condition would be inherent. Perhaps one could interpret this to mean that the flow of appearances as unestablished as divine, that is, ordinary experiences, are nevertheless primordially pure, although the unenlightened mind does not view them this way. Thus, when one achieves enlightenment, there is no more suffering because one is totally dissolved in appearances as divine. As has been said, the path is the result. It is primordial purity that is generating the experience of enlightenment. As Rongzom says, 'Even the mind of an ordinary being is naturally characterized by complete purification' (ibid., 107).

But it would be a mistake to conclude that ultimately the establishment of appearances into the divine is a result of cause and effect. As Śāntarakṣita explains in the *Tattvasiddhi*:

In the three realms without exception, all is like a magical display. Like magic, it can be seen and touched, yet it cannot be veridically perceived. In this manner, not having conceptions, the yogi through the practice of mudrā, is able to purify all three realms by this special mind. (*TAT*, folio 58, no 29B)

Thus Buddha said in the Buddha Yoga Tantra [Sangye Naljor]:

With really joyful effort (mngon brtson pa), maintaining this connection [non-conceptual enjoyment], the yogi will direct his or her efforts in this way. His or her mind, completely in a non-conceptual [state], will reflect all forms from the mirror of wisdom. If aspects are perceived in this way, arising from the mirror of wisdom, with one's own mind free of conceptions, all aspects are [reflected] from the mirror of wisdom. The mirror-like display is similar to a [collection of] magic dreams, or bubbles of water, and optical illusions [all non-substantial]. When one perceives this way, as the Buddha said, one is declared to be a master. (*TAT*, folio 60, no 30B)

[But how could] liberating knowledge arise from subject and object when it arises from dualistic thinking [which makes use of conventional signs]? This offers no proof of the non-conceptual, because the object itself is a hindrance. Through logic one cannot achieve any result through [working with] objects in this way, because the cause and effect are really unconnected. Duality and non-duality exist at the same time, so one cannot be the cause of the other. And if the cause is gone, the result cannot come.

Nor can it be known through invisible reasoning. [Logic of nonapprehension or invisible reasoning—*ma dmigs pai rtags* [e.g., if there were an elephant on the table, I would see it. I do not see an elephant on the table. Therefore there is no elephant on the table], because the subject is not the sort of thing that could be perceived [because non-conceptual.] Thus as previously said, reasoning will not work. Reasoning about cause and effect is not correct, this is true, because since there is no cause, there is no result. Thus nothing is produced. If the cause is not gone, the result will not be produced. Because things arise instantaneously, time does not tarry. If there were no change, everything would be permanent. If there were no instantaneous activity objects would be like sky flowers. How could they arise? Thus for instance, [as Nāgārjuna says]: 'If the seed is not gone, how does the sprout arise? It is said by omniscient Buddha that all results arise like magic'.

Thus, whatever Buddha the protector said about the birth, arising, and transitory nature of sentient beings is a temporary truth.

In the absolute state, nothing is developing or existing. [Therefore, although we cannot say exactly how non-conceptual wisdom arises from the transformation of experience, there is no proof that this is impossible]. Because production and producer are not in contact [lit. are not agreeable] cause and effect do not really exist. It [the nonconceptual] is very hidden [mysterious] and cannot be logically demonstrated. (*TAT*, folio 72, no 36B)

A Vajrayāna ritual text, notably in the bodhicitta section relating to compassion, puts the issue of enlightenment succinctly. 'Saṃsāra and nirvāṇa are the same. It is the perspective that is the difference.' It is a perspective that encompasses both subject and object. It is a perspective that is not on anything but is a transformed experience of appearances.

Śāntarakṣita's philosophical works

Śāntarakṣita composed many Buddhist treatises. His philosophical works are:

- Commentary on [Jñānagarbhāś] Distinction between the Two Truths (Satyadvaya vibhaṅgapañjika);*
Commentary on the Vada-Nyaya of Dharmakīrti (Vāda-Nyāya-Vipañcitārtha);
The Compendium of Suchness (Tattvasamgraha);
The Ornament of the Middle Way (Madhyamakālamkāra);
Commentary on The Ornament of the Middle Way (Madhyamakālamkāravṛtti);
The Attainment of Suchness (Tattvasiddhi);
Investigation of the Ultimate (Paramārthavinīskaya) [lost].

All of them were translated into Tibetan. English translations of *The Ornament of the Middle Way* and *The Compendium of Suchness* have been published. English translations of the Auto Commentary on *The Ornament of the Middle Way* and *The Attainment of Suchness* will soon be released.

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