

Relative Truth, Ultimate Truth: A Comprehensive Technical Analysis of Buddhist Epistemology

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In the study of Buddhist philosophy, particularly within the Tibetan Gelug tradition as presented by **Geshe Tashi Tsering** in his seminal work, *Relative Truth, Ultimate Truth*, the doctrine of the **Two Truths** serves as the fundamental framework for understanding reality. This conceptual duality—comprising **Conventional (Relative) Truth** (*samvrti-satya*) and **Ultimate Truth** (*paramartha-satya*)—is not merely a theoretical exercise but a precise epistemological tool designed to reconcile the appearance of the world with its actual mode of existence. As a technical foundation, it provides the bridge between the path of practice and the result of enlightenment, ensuring that the practitioner avoids the two extremes of **nihilism** and **eternalism**.

The Theoretical Framework of the Two Truths

To understand the technical nuances of the Two Truths, one must first define the parameters of truth within Buddhist epistemology. Unlike Western classical logic, which often operates on a single-tier reality, Buddhist thought suggests that an object can be 'true' or 'false' depending on the perspective of the **Valid Cognizer** (*pramana*) observing it. The Two Truths are defined by their relationship to the object's appearance and its final nature.

1. Conventional Truth (Samvrti-satya)

The term **Samvrti** literally translates to 'concealing' or 'covering.' Conventional truths are those phenomena that appear to exist as independent, solid entities to a mind obscured by ignorance. Technically, they are described as 'truths' only for the perspective of a conventional, worldly consciousness. They encompass the entire world of functions, causes, effects, and language. For example, a table is a conventional truth; it functions, it can be named, and it exists in relation to its parts, yet it lacks an intrinsic, independent essence.

2. Ultimate Truth (Paramartha-satya)

Paramartha refers to the 'highest object.' The Ultimate Truth is the final mode of existence of all phenomena: **Emptiness** (*sunyata*). It is the fact that all things are empty of **inherent existence** (*svabhava*). While conventional truth is what is perceived by a valid conventional mind, ultimate truth is what is perceived by a **Superior Being's** (*Arya*) meditative equipoise directly perceiving reality without the mediation of concepts.

Comparative Analysis of the Four Tenet Schools

The depth of Geshe Tashi Tsering's analysis lies in the systematic breakdown of how different Buddhist philosophical schools (Tenet Schools) define these two truths. This progression represents a refinement of logic from lower to higher views.

Philosophical School	Definition of Relative Truth	Definition of Ultimate Truth	Key Philosophical Stance
Vaibhashika	Phenomena that, when broken down or analyzed, lose their identity (e.g., a forest).	Phenomena that remain identifiable even after division (e.g., partless atoms, moments of consciousness).	Substantialist Realism.
Sautrantika	Generalities, concepts, and mental constructs that do not have causal efficiency.	Functional things (impermanent phenomena) that possess causal power.	Representationalism; focus on causal efficiency.
Cittamatra (Mind-Only)	The duality of subject and object; things appearing external to the mind.	The emptiness of the duality of subject and object; the non-dual mind.	Idealism; rejection of external matter.
Madhyamaka (Middle Way)	Phenomena that exist dependently through name and label.	The lack of inherent existence in all phenomena (Emptiness).	Anti-essentialism; Dependent Origination.

The Vaibhashika and Sautrantika Perspectives

In the lower schools, truth is often tied to **reducibility**. For the **Vaibhashikas**, something is conventionally true if the mind no longer perceives it once it is physically broken down. A vase is conventionally true because, if smashed, the 'vase-consciousness' ceases. However, the **ultimate truths** are the indivisible building blocks—partless atoms and partless moments of time—that remain. This is a form of **reductionist realism**.

The **Sautrantikas** shift the definition toward **causal efficacy**. For them, an ultimate truth is anything that can perform a function (*arthakriya*). A real fire is an ultimate truth because it can burn; the concept of 'fire' is a relative truth because the word itself cannot produce heat.

The Cittamatra Shift

The **Cittamatra (Mind-Only)** school introduces a more psychological technicality. They divide reality into **The Three Natures**:

- Imputed Nature (Parikalpita): The false belief in external objects and a separate self (Purely relative).
- Dependent Nature (Paratantra): The flow of consciousness that arises due to internal seeds (The basis of reality).
- Thoroughly Established Nature (Parinispanna): The ultimate truth, which is the absence of the imputed nature within the dependent nature.

Technical Analysis: The Madhyamaka Prasangika View

The **Prasangika Madhyamaka**, considered the highest view in the Tibetan tradition, offers the most radical and refined definition of the Two Truths. Here, the distinction is based on the **Object of Negation**.

The Mechanism of Dependent Origination

The Prasangikas argue that **Relative Truth** and **Ultimate Truth** are not two different 'worlds' or 'entities' but two aspects of the same thing. This is captured in the formula: *Appearance is Dependent Origination; Emptiness is the absence of Inherent Existence*.

The Sevenfold Reasoning of the Chariot

To technically establish the emptiness of a person or object, Geshe Tashi Tsering details the **Sevenfold Reasoning**. Using a chariot as a model, we search for the 'intrinsic chariot' through seven logical steps:

1. The chariot is not the parts (wheels, axle, etc.).
2. The chariot is not the whole (as an entity separate from parts).
3. The chariot does not possess its parts.
4. The chariot is not in its parts.
5. The parts are not in the chariot.
6. The chariot is not the collection of the parts.
7. The chariot is not the shape of the parts.

When the 'chariot' cannot be found through any of these technical searches, we realize its **emptiness**. However—and this is the crucial technical distinction—the chariot still exists **conventionally**. It functions, it carries people, and it is labeled. Its 'truth' is its functionality; its 'ultimacy' is its unfindability.

Practical Implementation: A Field Guide for Meditation

Integrating these concepts into practice requires a systematic approach. The transition from intellectual understanding to direct realization involves specific stages of **Analytic Meditation** followed by **Single-Pointed Abiding**.

Step 1: Identifying the Object of Negation

One must first clearly identify how things *seem* to exist. Before you can realize emptiness, you must see how your mind habitually perceives objects as having their own 'side' or 'power.' This is the **Sense of Inherent Existence**.

Step 2: Applying the Logical Slivers

Use the **Diamond Slivers** reasoning to analyze the production of things. Does a thing arise from itself, from something else, from both, or causelessly? By refuting these four possibilities, one arrives at the logical necessity of emptiness.

Step 3: Balancing the Two Truths

A common error (the 'Nihilistic Trap') is to think that because things are empty, they do not exist at all. The practitioner must technically maintain the **unfailing nature of cause and effect** while simultaneously seeing the empty nature of those causes. This is known as the **Union of Method and Wisdom**.

Troubleshooting Common Philosophical Errors

Technical mastery of this topic requires avoiding two primary pitfalls that Geshe Tashi Tsering emphasizes throughout the *Foundation of Buddhist Thought* series.

1. The Pitfall of Nihilism

Nihilism occurs when a practitioner over-negates. They might conclude that since nothing has inherent existence, actions have no consequences, and morality is irrelevant. To solve this, one must reinforce the understanding of **Conventional Truth** as 'unfailing' within its own sphere.

2. The Pitfall of Eternalism

Eternalism occurs when one fails to negate enough. This happens when a practitioner thinks emptiness is a 'thing' or a 'source' (like a Cosmic Soul). Emptiness is a **non-affirming negation**; it is merely the absence of a specific quality (inherent existence) and is not a substance itself.

Engineering the Path: The Four Great Reasonings

In the technical study of Madhyamaka, four main syllogisms are used to prove emptiness:

- The Diamond Slivers: Analyzing the cause of phenomena.
- The Refutation of Production of the Four Extremes: Analyzing the process of arising.
- The Refutation of Production from the Four Alternatives: Analyzing the result.
- The Great Dependent Origination Reasoning: The 'King of Reasonings' which uses the very fact of a thing's existence to prove its emptiness.

Synthesis of the Two Truths and Broader Implications

The technical integration of Relative and Ultimate Truth is the pinnacle of Buddhist epistemology. By understanding that things are conventionally existent but ultimately empty, the practitioner gains a **holistic and transformative understanding** of the world. This prevents the mind from grasping at objects with attachment (seeing them as inherently desirable) or aversion (seeing them as inherently repulsive).

As outlined in the curriculum of the **Foundation of Buddhist Thought**, this study is not merely academic. It provides the logical infrastructure for the entire Mahayana path. When we see that all beings are empty of inherent existence, we realize that their suffering is also dependently arisen and, therefore, can be removed. This realization fuels **Compassion** (*karuna*). Thus, the technical study of the Two Truths is the engine that drives both personal liberation and the altruistic intent to benefit others.

The clarity provided by Geshe Tashi Tsering's presentation ensures that the modern student can navigate these complex Indian and Tibetan philosophies with precision. By moving from the reductionism of the Vaibhashika to the non-dualism of the Cittamatra, and finally to the radical dependency of the Prasangika Madhyamaka, the seeker finds a path that is logically sound, scientifically compatible, and profoundly transformative.

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