



MOONSHADOWS

*Conventional Truth in
Buddhist Philosophy*

THE COWHERDS

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Preface

This is an unusual volume. It is neither an anthology nor a monograph. We prefer to think of it as a *polygraph*—a collectively written volume reflecting the varying views of a large collection of authors. Many chapters are written by single authors. Some are written by teams. But every chapter is informed by extensive discussion among us, both of general philosophical and exegetical issues and of the chapters themselves. So, in an important sense, no matter whose name appears at the head of each chapter, the chapter is the fruit of extensive collaboration. This is so despite the fact that we recognize substantial differences among us regarding interpretation and philosophy. We believe that those differences, as much as the agreements that have emerged from our collective effort, as well as the connections between these essays, which have been forged in argument, add to the richness of this treatment.

The volume is written by the Cowherds. First a comment is in order about the name. Those familiar with Madhyamaka literature will recognize the reference to Candrakīrti's phrase, "what even people like cowherds and women recognize" (*gopālāṅganājanaprasiddha*).¹ We are bothered by the sexism of the reference to women, an attitude taken for granted in Candrakīrti's cultural milieu but no

1. See Candrakīrti (1970b), 260, line 14. See also the use of the phrase *gnag rdzi yan chad la grags pa* ("acknowledged/recognized by everyone from cowherds on up") in Kamalāśīla's *Sarvadharmāṅghrasiddhi* (chapter 9, n5).

longer acceptable. There is a whiff of classism in the use of “cowherds” (*gopāla*, *gopa*, *gopi*; Tibetan *glang rdzi*, *gnag rdzi*) as well. But we hope that the irony in our use of this term to refer to ourselves is apparent. We hope that we can appropriate “cowherds” as a synonym for “the man on the street,” to indicate the ordinary working person. What cowherds know, in this sense, is what you need to know to do whatever you do, whether it be dairy farming or philosophy. To paraphrase JFK, we are all cowherds! Of course, what it is that we each, or we all, need to know, is not clear. Hence this book—an exploration of conventional truth and what is true about it.

Caveat lector! We should be clear that, while this book is about conventional truth and while it is firmly anchored in Madhyamaka ideas about conventional truth (*saṃvṛtisatya*, *vyavahārasatya*), it is *not* a history of the concept of conventional truth in Buddhist philosophy; it is not a philological study of Buddhists texts or doctrines on conventional truth; it is not an attempt to present a “fair and balanced” representation of Buddhist accounts of conventional truth. Instead, it is an exploration, by a diverse group of philosophers with a set of related interests, of a set of questions about conventional truth that arise from the way the idea of conventional truth is deployed in certain corners of Buddhist philosophy.

In particular, we are animated by four principal questions that arise primarily from a consideration of Candrakīrti’s treatment of this topic and the way his treatment is taken up by subsequent Buddhist scholars, prominently including Tibetan commentators:

1. What is conventional truth?
2. What is *true* about conventional truth?
3. How *flexible* is conventional truth? How much can it be revised?
4. What are the implications of all of this for how we live our lives?

The first question forces us to start textually and doctrinally, to figure out what Candrakīrti, those with whom he was in dialogue, and those who read and commented on him understood by *saṃvṛtisatya* or *vyavahārasatya*. The second, third, and fourth, though, take us well beyond exegesis and into philosophical puzzles, albeit puzzles anchored in and arising from the Buddhist tradition. In what sense is something true that in another is characterized as entirely false, misleading, to be taken seriously only by fools and cowherds? How fixed is it? If it is determined by conventions, and if conventions are malleable, is conventional truth similarly malleable? And what is its import for ethics, for science, for epistemology?

In addressing these questions we may do philosophy *with* Candrakīrti, but we are beholden neither to him nor to anyone else in the Buddhist tradition

when we answer those questions. We are after truth, or at least insight, not just understanding of antique positions. For this reason, many of the essays in this volume are not textual at all but are systematic philosophical explorations of questions raised, but not answered, by classical Buddhist texts. We are, after all, contemporary philosophers with contemporary concerns and a conviction that we can address those concerns in part by attention to Buddhist thought.

This commitment to philosophy of course raises interesting methodological questions about Buddhist studies. Are we doing real Buddhist studies when we deploy ideas and techniques from contemporary analytic philosophy to address questions arising from seventh-century Indian debates as adumbrated in fifteenth-century Tibet? We think so. And we think that Buddhist philosophy has much to contribute to twenty-first-century Western philosophy. We also think that contemporary philosophy has much to contribute to Buddhist thought. We hence hope that our explorations will be of interest both to those who care deeply about what *some* scholars in the tradition thought about conventional truth and to those who just care about conventional truth and are open to learning from Buddhist philosophy.

The Cowherds are Georges Dreyfus (Williams College), Bronwyn Finnigan (University of Auckland), Jay L. Garfield (Smith College, the University of Melbourne, and the Central University of Tibetan Studies), Guy Newland (Central Michigan University), Graham Priest (University of Melbourne, St. Andrews University, City University of New York), Mark Siderits (Seoul National University), Koji Tanaka (University of Auckland), Sonam Thakchöe (University of Tasmania), Tom Tillemans (University of Lausanne), and Jan Westerhoff (Durham University).

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I

An Introduction to Conventional Truth

Guy Newland and Tom J. F. Tillemans

*dve satye samupāśritya buddhānāṃ dharmadeśanā /
loksaṃvṛtisatyam ca satyam ca paramārthataḥ //*

The various buddhas' teaching of the Dharma relies upon two truths: the conventional truth of the world (*loksaṃvṛtisatyā*) and what is true from the ultimate perspective (*paramārthataḥ*). (MMK XXIV.8)

This famous verse was composed by the second-to-third-century CE South Indian thinker Nāgārjuna. It is the clearest statement of the two truths anywhere in Nāgārjuna's corpus and is often cited in the literature of the Madhyamaka, or "Middle Way," school of Buddhist philosophy.¹

This book is a journey through some of the epistemological, metaphysical, and ethical byways that lead from this distinction between the two truths, especially those on the conventional side. The thinker we meet most frequently along these roads is Candrakīrti, an enigmatic sixth-to-seventh-century scholar of Nālandā monastery, whose interpretation of Nāgārjuna remained on the

1. There is an enormous and burgeoning secondary literature on Madhyamaka that we cannot detail here. For an excellent introduction to Madhyamaka, see Arnold (2005b). On the history, philosophy, and literature of the Indian Madhyamaka school, see Seyfort Ruegg (1981), May (1979). On the Svātantrika-Prāsaṅgika distinction in Madhyamaka, see Dreyfus and McClintock (2003), Seyfort Ruegg (2006); on the two truths in Tibetan Ge-luk Madhyamaka, see Tauscher (1995), Newland (1992), Hopkins (1983).

margins in India but took center stage in Tibet. Mādhyamikas such as Bhā(va)-viveka, Kamalaśīla, Tsongkhapa, Patsab, and Gorampa are among the others we encounter.² We invite you to join us in this hermeneutical and philosophical journey of rationally warranted reconstruction governed by the principle of charity and a concern to discover what is of value to us in this ancient tradition. Our exploration will be guided by the following considerations.

What Is Truth?

We begin with a vexing problem for philosophically savvy translators. Introductions to Buddhism routinely tell us that Buddhist philosophers have long distinguished two truths: conventional and ultimate. Buddhist texts sometimes characterize these truths as *statements* (very roughly, those that are just taken to be true and those that are actually true) and other times as *states of affairs* or *sorts of things* (those generally taken to be real and those that are fully real). Now, it would seem on a little analysis that we cannot call both statements and things “truths.” Is “truth” then just a misnomer or sloppy translation? Could we do better with some other rendering?

“Truth” here translates the Sanskrit *satya*, the Tibetan *bden pa*, and the Chinese *di* 諦, and it certainly is neither a wrong nor a sloppy translation. Nonetheless, it is problematic. The problem is that rendering *satya*, or its Tibetan, Pali, and Chinese equivalents, as “truth” naturally suggests that conventional and ultimate truths are all *truthbearers*, that is, statements, propositions, or, if we take a larger perspective, beliefs, ideas, and theories—in short, the sort of things to which we can properly attribute truth and falsity. As we shall see, the Buddhists did often use *satya* as pertaining to statements. This seems to be the initial way the two truths were formulated. However, *satya* pertains not only to such truthbearers; things like pots and atoms can just as well be *satya*, and it is at least anomalous to ascribe truth to them.

In short, because *satya* means “truth” but also can mean “real” and “what is existent,” translational problems are unavoidable. There is no English term that is equivalent in all contexts. The problems can however be significantly

2. In the present book we follow the modern convention of using “Madhyamaka” for the philosophy or school and “Mādhyamika” for the thinkers who profess this philosophy. This modern convention was promoted by P. L. Vaidya and others, who were inspired by the clear distinction between the Tibetan terms *dbu ma* and *dbu ma pa*. On the rather shaky Indian basis for this Tibetan-inspired hypercorrection, see May (1979, 472) (*Hōbōgirin* s.v. *chūgan*). Akira Saitō in a forthcoming paper (“On the Meaning and Beginning of the Madhyamaka/Mādhyamika School”) finds some evidence for taking “Madhyamaka” as referring (on the balance) to the thought and “Mādhyamika” (on the balance) to the thinkers.

attenuated if we are conscious of the differing semantic ranges of “truth” and *satya* and if we adjust our translation when needed. The Cowherds have therefore agreed to use “truth” as our default translation of *satya* but to use “reality” or “existence” when the context demands. We have sought to minimize confusion by avoiding gratuitous use of the word “truth” as a translation for *satya* in the many cases where the term refers to an object rather than to a semantic notion. The relationship between the two senses of *satya* will be taken up in more detail later.³ But for the moment, let us ask: How did the doctrine of two truths develop?

The Two Truths

The Buddhist notion of two truths (*satyadvaya*), conventional and ultimate, was initially a construct for reconciling apparently contradictory statements in scripture based on their pedagogical intent. It developed in connection with another pair of terms that was also used in sorting out conflicts between scriptural passages, that is, the distinction between statements whose meaning is definitive (Pali *nitattha* = Skt. *nītārtha*) and those whose meaning requires interpretation (Pali *neyyattha* = Skt. *neyārtha*); the *Aṅguttaranikāya* commentary (*Aṅṅhakathā*) attributed to Buddhaghosa and other texts make this linkage explicit.⁴ Indeed, the use of a double truth as a way of sorting out apparently conflicting statements in the Buddhist teaching is what we see in the passage from Nāgārjuna’s *Mūlamadhyamakārikā*, with which we began this introduction; it also seems to lie behind a famous passage in the commentary to the *Kathāvatthu* of the *Abhidhammapiṭaka*:

3. See introduction, pp. 8–10, and especially chapter 8.

4. References in Karunadasa (1996, 25–26 and n. 139); see also Karunadasa (2006). These two valuable articles have been heavily relied upon in connection with *Nikāya* and *Aṅṅhakathā* passages. On *nitattha* and *neyyattha* see, for example, *Aṅguttaranikāya* II, p. 60 (Pali Text Society, ed.= PTS): *Dve ’me bhikkhave Tathāgataṃ nābbhācikkhanti. Katame dve? Yo ca neyyatthaṃ suttantaṃ neyyattho suttanto ti dipito: yo ca nitatthaṃ suttantaṃ nitattho suttanto ti dipeti. Ime kho bhikkhave Tathāgataṃ nābbhācikkhanti.* “These two, O Monks, do not misrepresent the Tathāgatha (Buddha). Which two? He who proclaims that a discourse whose meaning requires interpretation is one whose meaning requires interpretation and he who proclaims that a discourse of definitive meaning is a discourse of definitive meaning; these two, O Monks, do not misrepresent the Tathāgatha.” Note that not just Buddhaghosa but also later Mahāyāna authors make the connection with the two truths. Certain controversial statements whose meaning requires interpretation (*neyārtha*) are classified as conventional (*saṃvṛtī*) and not ultimate (*paramārtha*). *Bodhicaryāvatārapañjikā* (ed. Vaidya 233, 5–7), in discussing the *Dhammapada*’s seeming acceptance of the self (*ātman*), states: *tad api cātmaḍṣṭyabhiniviṣṭānām anyatrātmagrāhaparikalpavicchedārthaṃ neyārthatayā saṃvṛtyā cittaṃ ātmeti prakāśitaṃ na tu paramārthataḥ* “This too [i.e., the fact that mind is said to be the controller (*damana*) is said] so that those who are attached to the view of self will on another occasion eliminate their imaginary grasping at self; from the point of view of interpretive meaning, that is, conventionally, the mind is taught to be the self, but not ultimately.”

The Enlightened One, the best of all teachers, propounded two truths, conventional and ultimate; we do not see a third. A statement governed [purely] by agreement is true because of the world's conventions, and an ultimate statement is true in that it characterizes things as they are.⁵

Both Nāgārjuna and the commentator to the *Kathāvatthu* thus claim that the origins of the two truths go back to the Buddha or even the buddhas. It is impossible to determine whether this is historically accurate. In any case, seeking to construct integrated systems from the many discourses the Buddha gave to diverse audiences, early Buddhist scholars relied upon the two truths as a hermeneutic device. Only passages taken to be pointing to the final nature of reality were read as ultimate truth, while conventional truth was found in passages taken to rely upon, rather than to reject, more superficial constructs.

For example, the Buddha famously teaches that the person is a mere nominal designation based upon an ever-changing flux of mental states and physical elements. The person is utterly empty of intrinsic nature; the notion of an intrinsically real person or self is a delusion. In the *Samyuttanikāya*, the Buddha explains how ultimate awakening involves recognition of this process of conventional designation and consequent understanding of the person's lack of intrinsic nature:

Those who go by names, who go by concepts . . . are subject to the reign of death; he who has discerned the naming-process does not suppose that *one who names* exists. No such case exists for him in truth, whereby one could say: "He's this or that."⁶

Nonetheless, in the *Aṅguttaranikāya* we read that there was indeed "a person" who "was born out of compassion for the world" and that this person was a fully enlightened one, a buddha.⁷ The two truths were deployed to reconcile such affirmative statements about, and distinctions with regard to, persons, ethics, and spiritual attainment with the notion that there is *ultimately* no way to say that the Buddha—or any person—is this or that.

5. *Kathāvatthupparakaraṇaṭṭhakathā*, p. 34; *Aṅguttaranikāya Aṭṭhakathā Manorathapūraṇi* I, p. 54:

*duve saccāni akkhāsi sambuddho vadatam varo /
sammūtiṃ paramatthaṃ ca tatiyaṃ nūpalabbhati //
saṃketavacanaṃ saccaṃ lokasammūtikāraṇam /
paramatthavacanaṃ saccaṃ dhammānaṃ tathalakkhaṇam //*

6. *Samyuttanikāya* 1.20, trans. Maurice Walshe in *Samyutta Nikāya: An Anthology* (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1985).

7. See *Aṅguttaranikāya*, trans. Woodward and Hare (1965–1973), vol. 1, pp. 14–15. Other examples would be frequent statements in the Jātaka tales such as "I was that swan."

On what basis might an enlightened person be justified or even *truthful* in thus speaking in a manner contrary to her or his ultimate understanding? The *Samyuttanikāya* tells us that such a person would, for example, use personal pronouns in reference to (empty) persons because “well aware of common worldly speech, he would speak conforming to such use.”⁸

Buddhapālita—an early commentator on Nāgārjuna’s classic presentation of the emptiness (*śūnyatā*) of all phenomena in the *Mūlamadhayamakārikā*—gives us a vivid story on conventional truth as a property of speech conforming to the world’s perspective:

As two villagers were passing through a city on business, they entered a temple to take in the sights. As they began examining the paintings, one remarked, “The one holding the trident is Narāyāna; the one with the discus is Maheśvara.” The other answered, “You have it wrong. Mhaeśvara holds the trident and Narāyāna has the discus.” As they argued, they came upon a nearby wandering sage. They paid their respects and each explained his opinion. To one of them the sage replied, “What you say is true,” and to the other he said, “What you say is not true.”⁹

The sage knows that neither god is present; these are just paintings on the wall. Yet he is not lying when he answers the villagers because what he says is “true through the force of worldly convention.” The story concludes by stating that, like the sage, the Buddha employs distinctions between right and wrong, true and false, real and unreal, within a conventional framework quite different from his own deep understanding of emptiness.

How are sources like these to be interpreted? A familiar formula has it that conventional truths are somehow considered truths for strategic reasons, with understanding the ultimate as the goal.¹⁰ Indeed conforming to the world’s language is often presented as skillful method (*upāyakauśalya*) to lead *beyond* the conventional. Nāgārjuna’s *Mūlamadhayamakārikā* states:

The ultimate is not taught without depending upon the conventional;
one will not attain *nirvāṇa* without having understood the ultimate.¹¹

8. *Samyuttanikāya* 1.25, in *Samyutta Nikaya*.

9. Translation based on edition of chapter 18 of the *Buddhapālita-mūlamadhayamakāvṛtti* in Lindtner (1981, 197–198).

10. See, for example, Mav VI.80: *tha snyad bden pa thabs su gyur pa dang / don dam bden pa thabs byung gyur pa ste* “Conventional truth is the means/approach and ultimate truth is the goal.” See Tauscher (1995, 3–4). Cf. *Bodhicaryāvatārapañjikā* (ed. Vaidya 236, 4): *tatra ca upeyabhūtaḥ paramārthādhiḡama eva / tasyāpy upāyabhūtaḥ saṃvṛtisatyam* / “Now in this context it is just the mastery of the ultimate that is the goal; for that too the understanding of the conventional is the means (*upāya*).”

11. MMK XXIV.10: *vyavahāram anāśṛitya paramārtho na deśyate / paramārtham anāgamyā nirvāṇaṃ nādhiḡamyate* //. Sanskrit in Louis de la Vallée Poussin’s edition of PP, p. 494. French translation, May 1959, 229.

Such passages then tempt the interpretation that conventional truth is not indeed truth *at all* but just a set of worldly beliefs and language usage that are *pedagogically* necessary in order for one to be taught how to replace them or go beyond them to the actual truth. Nāgārjuna's disciple Āryadeva seems to lean toward this interpretation when he writes:

Just as one cannot make a barbarian understand by any language other [than his own], so too ordinary persons cannot be made to understand without [using] what is mundane.¹²

Yet from the outset, exegetical and pedagogical conceptions of the two truths were mixed with more deeply philosophical considerations that, in some circles, gradually came to the fore. When Ābhidharmika scholars indicate that a statement is an “ultimate truth,” this is on account of its main referent's location within the class of ultimate realities, existents discerned under the deepest analysis of appearances. *Mutatis mutandis*, for conventional truth. We thus have in Abhidharma two sorts of *existent things*—that is, conventional existents (*saṃvṛtisat*) and ultimate existents (*paramārthasat*)—that are described by the two sorts of *true statements*. Laying out the Abhidharma's understanding of *saṃvṛtisat* and *saṃvṛtisatya* (not to be confused with that of Madhyamaka!), Vasubandhu states in the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*:

Suppose that when a thing is broken up into parts the idea of it then will no longer occur. That thing is conventionally existent (*saṃvṛtisat*), as for example, a pot. . . . But people have applied a conventional term [like “pot” or “water”] to just those [constitutive elements], and thus because of that convention they say “Pots and water exist.” So they say that this [statement] is true and not false. Thus it is a conventional truth.¹³

The two truths thus involve a conception of *standpoints* (“ultimately” = *paramārthatas* or “conventionally” = *saṃvṛtitas*) from which (1) certain types of objects exist and (2) certain types of statements are true. These ultimate and conventional standpoints are often linked to the distinction between analytical knowledge (*paricchede nāñā*) and knowledge of linguistic conventions (*sammutiñāna*), which is found in the *Saṅgītisutta* of the *Dīghanikāya* and also many Mahāyāna texts.¹⁴

12. Āryadeva's *Catuḥśatakaśāstrakārikā* as cited in PP, ed. L. de la Vallée Poussin 370: *nānyabhāṣayā mlecchaḥ śakyo grāhayitum yathā // na laukikaṃ ṛte lokaḥ śakyo grāhayitum tathā //*.

13. Vasubandhu (1967, 334): *yasminn avayavaśo bhinne na tadbuddhir bhavati tat saṃvṛtisat / tadyathā ghaṭaḥ / . . . teṣv eva tu saṃvṛtisamjñā kṛteti saṃvṛtīvaśāt ghaṭaś cāmbu cāstīti bruvantaḥ satyam evāhur na mṛṣety etat saṃvṛtisatyam /*.

14. *Dīghanikāya*, PTS, vol. III, p. 226.

From this basis the two truths came to be understood most often as the *two classes of things* that those two standpoints present to view. Indeed, many texts emphasize the position of the two truths as objects (*viṣaya*), explaining them as two sorts of things to be known (*jñeya*) by two radically different types of mind, that is, those of ordinary beings, who understand wrongly, and those of the spiritually realized “noble ones” (*ārya*), who understand rightly. The *Pitrputrasamāgamāsūtra* states that “objects of knowledge are exhausted within the two, conventional realities and ultimate realities.”¹⁵ And Candrakīrti’s *Madhyamakāvātāra* states:

All things bear two natures constituted through correct and false views. The object (*viṣaya*) of those who see correctly is said to be “reality” (*tattva*) and the object of those who see falsely is said to be “conventional existence” (*saṃvṛtisatya*).¹⁶

Historically, thus, there seems to have been a move from statements to objects, but, philosophically speaking, how could this happen? At this point we must return to the disconcerting fact that the very term we generally render as “truth” (*satya*) is extensively used for existent realities (*satya*) rather than the veracity of statements or ideas. It might be facily answered that this is not a problem, for we do on occasion apply “true” to people and things. That is, we can say of the forty-third U.S. president that he was a true fool, or we may characterize a pond in the desert as a true oasis when we had earlier suspected that it was only a mirage. Yet the quandary remains, for true fools are just very misguided people, and true oases are just real ones. Neither example suggests that people or ponds are somehow *truthbearers* in anything like the way statements, ideas, etc. are. This oft-heard answer thus does not work. Is there then a type of core element in the meaning of *satya* that would enable us to see why the term might have the broad semantic range it does and why it is not just simply equivocal?

15. Cited in Śāntideva’s *Śikṣasamuccaya* dbu ma vol.1.16 in D. (Tokyo ed.), 142b.

16. Mav VI.23, cited in *Bodhicaryāvatārapañjikā* 361:

samyagmṛśādarśanalabdhabhāvam /
rūpadvayaṃ bibhṛati sarvabhāvāḥ //
samyagdrśāṃ yo viṣayaḥ sa tattvam /
mṛśādrśāṃ saṃvṛtisatyam uktam //

See also Newland (1992, 40ff). We have translated *labdhabhāvam* as “constituted,” literally “whose being is gained.” This is in keeping with Louis de la Vallée Poussin’s French translation: “les choses portent une double nature qui est constituée par la vue exacte et par la vue erronée.” The Tibetan *myed pa* (= *labdha*), if taken as “[whose being] is found,” could (if taken literally) yield an interpretation of the verse as meaning that the two natures are in some sense there and then found by two types of perceptions. Note that Graham Priest’s interpretation of this verse as showing two aspects stemming from two perspectives on one thing (chapter 13) can be seen as in keeping with “constituted.” Garfield (chapter 2) clearly opts for “found,” as does Tsongkhapa.

For such a charitable reading of *satya*, we could begin with the widely held intuition, East and West, that a statement, a mental state or any other truthbearer presents a certain picture of how things are. Tibetan Madhyamaka commentaries regularly emphasize that if there is some particular sense (conventional or ultimate) in which this picture (*snang tshul*, literally “mode of appearance”) accords (*mthun pa*) with how things are (*gnas tshul*), literally “mode of existence,” then we may be disposed to consider that the statement or mental state is true in that particular sense (conventional/ultimate).¹⁷ What we see in Tibetan commentaries is that this same distinction—between a mode of appearance and a mode of existence—is also used to apply to objects. Accord or discord is used to explain how those objects are *satya/bden pa* (true, real) or *mṛṣā/rdzun pa, slu ba* (false, deceptive).¹⁸ The term *satya* (truth/reality) thus often came to signify existent things—the referents of such statements or the objects of mental states—while the criteria for applying the term, that is, accord/discord, nonetheless remained the same.

What is needed to more fully understand this transition—and cannot be undertaken here—is a detailed analysis of the Buddhist notion of an object (*viṣaya, yul*) whether in Madhyamaka philosophy or in the epistemology of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti. It may well be that objects in many of these contexts have to be seen as not simply garden-variety things but as *intentional* objects, what thought and language are directly *about*.¹⁹ Intentional objects could match or fail to match ordinary things—when we think of, say, the political situation in Nepal, the object that directly appears to our thought (given a limited understanding of complex Nepalese politics) may bear only a very partial accord with what is actually going on there.

Finally, some may wonder: Why should one care much about what conventional truth is and is not? How important can conventional truth be if, in any case, it is not the ultimate? Each Buddhist school has its view of this matter, but a strong theme (especially in Mahāyāna philosophies) is that the conventional is not just pedagogically necessary but is the *only actual basis* for the ultimate. The ultimate (i.e., emptiness) captures the deepest/final way in which the conventional exists. For example, the *Bodhicittavivaraṇa*—a text traditionally attributed to Nāgārjuna—says:

17. To make a long story short, this can best be seen as a weak sense of “accord”/“correspondence,” one that should not be thought to require the full-blown correspondence theory of truth. See chapter 8 on truth and truth theories for a more detailed discussion.

18. The term frequently used in Indian Madhyamaka texts is *mṛṣā moṣadharmaka = brdzun pa slu ba'i chos can* “something false and deceptive”; see Candrakīrti’s *Catuhśatakaṭīkā* ad v. 324 (Tillemans 1990, 198). See also chapter 3, sections 2–4.

19. On such objects, see Crane (2001). Tillemans (1986) took up some of these themes, notably referential opacity in Buddhist philosophy of language. On opacity and the Buddhist epistemological school’s idea of an object, see also Stoltz (2006).

Just as sweetness is the nature of sugar and hotness the nature of fire, so we assert that the nature of things is emptiness . . . Reality is not to be seen as something different from conventionalities. Conventionalities are described as emptiness and just emptiness is the conventional because neither occurs without the other.²⁰

Along these lines, some Tibetan philosophers see the conventional as that which is empty (or the basis of emptiness) (*stong gzhi*) and the ultimate as the quality of being empty (*stong chos*). There is on this reading no possibility or even desirability that conventional truth be *replaced* by the ultimate. Indeed, the conventional becomes exactly what it is important to get right, and the ultimate, emptiness, is vital precisely because it strips away false superimpositions so as to allow right understanding of the conventional.

In the present book we take this sort of philosophical reading of the two truths rather than a pedagogical reading as our point of departure. Our priority here is *to take the conventional seriously*, seeing it as interesting and important.

Three Senses of *Samvṛti*

Both traditional exegetes and their modern interpreters and translators find many levels of meaning in the term *saṃvṛtisatya*, usually translated as “conventional truth.” We can begin by asking, “What is *conventional* about *saṃvṛtisatya*?”

First of all, “conventional” (i.e., *saṃvṛti* and the equivalent term *vyavahāra*) would prima facie suggest that we are dealing with some type of agreement between members of a community on an essentially arbitrary matter, such as devising rules of the road and other regulations (where general consensus promotes welfare) or choosing proper names (where again general acceptance of the name is vital to its practical success). Buddhists, of course, maintain that many things are conventional in the banal sense that rules of the road are: proper names, Sanskrit idiomatic expressions like calling the moon “that which has a rabbit” (*śaśin*), and so on, proceed purely by common acknowledgment (*pratīti*). Beyond that, however, *any* connection (*sambandha*) between words and their referents is conventional and purely arbitrary (*yādr̥cchika*). Buddhists, contrary to the Mīmāṃsā (one of the main Brahmanical schools), took pains to deny that there was any objective constraint or appropriateness (*yogyatā*) behind any of our linguistic usage. Interestingly enough, on an ethical-political level,

20. *Bodhicittavivarāṇa* v. 57 and 67cd–68. See Hopkins (2008, 107); Lindtner (1986, 54); and Newland (1992, 73).

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