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Considering the Buddhist View of Empti-
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A Lecture by Khenpo Chöying Dorjee
at UBC, February 28, 2019

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“‘How to Milk a Painted Cow’
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On February 28, 2019, Khenpo Chöying Dorjee gave a talk titled “‘How to Milk a Painted Cow’: Considering the Buddhist View of Emptiness.” This lecture was co-sponsored by the University of British Columbia’s Robert H. N. Ho Foundation Program in Buddhism and Contemporary Society and the Himalaya Program, with support from the Khyentse Foundation. Khenpo Chöying Dorjee is a scholar-monk from the Dzongsar Khyentse Chökyi Lödro Institute, a monastic university in India founded by Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche. He received his Khenpo degree in 2004 and is a specialist in Madhyamaka philosophy. The lecture was well attended by students and faculty, as well as Buddhist practitioners and visitors from the Vancouver area.

The focus of this talk was the Mahāyāna understanding of “emptiness,” explained through a discussion of the story of Candrakīrti milking a painted cow. This lecture had two main parts. Khenpo began with a

historical overview of Candrakīrti and the story of how he milked a painted cow, followed by a philosophical explanation of “emptiness.”

Candrakīrti was a fifth-century Indian scholar-monk who served as the main abbot of Nalanda University, where he was ordained. Others perceived him as a lazy and “not suitable” monk because of how much time he spent in his room, but, Khenpo asserted, he was actually spending that time doing meditation. This misperception led to Candrakīrti being appointed as the manager of the kitchen.

Out of compassion, Candrakīrti released all of the cows into the forest. To everyone’s surprise, Candrakīrti still brought milk to the mess hall the next day, even though there were no cows to milk. A fellow monk followed him to see where he was getting the milk and Candrakīrti led him to a painting of a cow. It was at this moment that the Head Master recognized Candrakīrti as a master of the mind because of his astute understanding of emptiness. When the Head Master later wrote his auto-commentary, he included the story of Candrakīrti milking a painted cow. Khenpo explained that this auto-commentary is the primary reason that the story was publicized and continued on as an important lesson in emptiness.

After relating this story and its significance to the audience, Khenpo began the second part of his lecture discussing the philosophical explanations of emptiness in the Madhyamaka tradition. This section was split into two parts: 1) What is buddhadharma? 2) What is the essence of Buddhism?

Khenpo expressed that regardless of how long you have studied Buddhism, it is always important to continually reexamine what Buddhism really is. He expounded on this by examining Vasubandhu’s ideas on *buddhadharma*.

As Khenpo instructed, *buddhadharma* is two things: scriptural *dharma* and realized *dharma*. The scriptural *dharma* refers to the words of the Buddha, as well as commentary on the words of the Buddha. On the other hand, the realized *dharma* consists of *śīla* (moral conduct/ethics), *samādhi* (concentration), and *prajñā* (wisdom).

In this section, Khenpo offered a metaphor for *śīla* as a way of cooling down. When you harbor guilt and regret, it builds in you like a fire. This metaphor illuminates how good moral conduct can not only help you achieve good karma, but also get your mind into a better state to meditate and understand these teachings.

After this explanation, Khenpo moved into the last part of his talk: What is the essence of Buddhism? He showed the audience stanza 48 from the *Bodhicittavivaraṇa* (Commentary of Awakening) by Nāgārjuna. Khenpo believes this stanza (48) to be one of the best verses because it holds the essence of the entire text.

Therefore constantly meditate on this emptiness:

The basis of all phenomena,

Tranquil and illusion-like,

Groundless and destroyer of cyclic existence.

Khenpo analyzed this stanza in terms of Nāgārjuna's five aspects of emptiness. First, emptiness is the basis of all phenomena. Khenpo elucidated using the metaphor of seeing a rope in a dark room and mistakenly perceiving it as a snake. Although the rope is harmless, the misperception causes fear to arise. Khenpo continued that if we do not recognize the nature of all phenomena as empty, then delusion causes ignorance and perpetuates karma and the cycle of existence.

Second, emptiness is tranquil and free from dualities, defilements and karma. It is a space that is inherently free from the pollution of ignorance.

Third, appearances are illusory-like and will arise even though they do not exist as we perceive them. Khenpo utilized the metaphor of a three-dimensional movie: although we can see it and it appears real to our senses, there is no true existence beyond that. He linked this metaphor to the commonly used phrase from the *Heart Sutra*, “form is emptiness, emptiness is form.” Emptiness is the source of all things, yet everything is inherently empty.

Fourth, when we analyze things, we cannot find any inherent essence in any phenomena. A thing will continue until the causes and conditions for it no longer persists. Khenpo held up the *mala* beads he had wrapped around his wrist. We perceive the *mala* and believe that it exists in his hand. However, when you break it down into its parts, you cannot find anything about it that is truly “*mala*.” His point was that there is no single thing that makes it a *mala*. It becomes a *mala* at the point where all causes and conditions come together to make it “*mala*.” This idea applies to all phenomena. It appears to us and we can perceive it, but there is no inherent existence.

Fifth, the function of emptiness is to destroy cyclic existence. When we fully understand emptiness, there is nothing to abandon or obtain. We simply see things as they really are. Khenpo said, “When we see what really is, that is nirvana.”

Khenpo Chöying Dorjee’s insightful talk expounded on emptiness in a clear and systematic manner. He ended the lecture by acknowledging the misperceptions of emptiness, which he argues are very confusing and often misinterpreted as nihilism. Things do not exist, nor not exist. Consequently, he explained, there is nothing to be destroyed. Emptiness

is inexpressible and beyond conceptualization, and therefore is an incredibly hard thing for people to grasp. Khenpo's charm and charisma lit up the room as he spoke and kept the audience engaged throughout his lecture. The philosophical questions asked by the audience at the close further highlighted the deep intrigue that comes along with difficult concepts such as "emptiness" in Buddhism.

As Khenpo explained at the beginning of his talk, "in fate, the painted cow and the real cow are equally not existent in reality as a 'cow'." Therefore, he continued, "You won't understand emptiness until you can milk a painted cow."