

De/limiting Emptiness and the Boundaries of the Ineffable

Douglas S. Duckworth

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Abstract Emptiness (*śūnyatā*) is one of the most important topics in Buddhist thought and also is one of the most perplexing. Buddhists in Tibet have developed a sophisticated tradition of philosophical discourse on emptiness and ineffability. This paper discusses the meaning(s) of emptiness within three prominent traditions in Tibet: the Geluk (*dge lugs*), Jonang (*jo nang*), and Nyingma (*rnying ma*). I give a concise presentation of each tradition's interpretation of emptiness and show how each interpretation represents a distinctive aspect of its meaning. Given that Buddhist traditions (1) accept an extra-linguistic reality and (2) maintain a strong tradition of suspicion of language with the belief that language both constructs and distorts reality, this paper responds to an issue that is not so much whether or not an inexpressible reality *can* be expressed, but rather *how* it is best articulated.

Keywords Emptiness · Ineffability · Tibet · Mipam · Buddhism

Introduction

A major issue concerning the meaning of emptiness is a recurring tension between presence and absence, which in Buddhist terms gets expressed in various ways such as appearance and emptiness, conventional and ultimate truth, Buddha-nature and emptiness, and other-emptiness and self-emptiness. This issue can be seen to have a history extending back to India in the competing depictions of the absolute as qualified (*saguṇa*) or unqualified (*nirguṇa*). A major tension in Tibetan thought is found between the positions that the ultimate truth must be a simple emptiness—a

D. S. Duckworth (✉)
Department of Philosophy and Humanities, East Tennessee State University,
Box 70656, Johnson City, TN 37614, USA
e-mail: duckworth@etsu.edu

negation—in contrast to more positively framed depictions of ultimate reality as a metaphysical presence existing as the ground of all.

In this paper, I seek to shed light on the meaning of emptiness through looking at representations of emptiness within three prominent sectarian traditions in Tibet: the Geluk (*dge lugs*), Jonang (*jo nang*), and Nyingma (*rnying ma*). I will give a concise presentation of a significant feature of each tradition's interpretation of emptiness to show how each interpretation represents a distinctive aspect of its meaning. Through this, we will be able to better understand the semantic range of emptiness and the contours of the ultimate truth in Buddhist Tibet. Also, we will come to appreciate the linguistic construction of the ineffable and the consequent problem of delineating its boundaries.

Emptiness in Jonang

The first representation of emptiness we will look at is the one offered by the Jonang tradition. The main authority of the Jonang tradition is Dölpopa (*dol po pa shes rab rgyal mtshan*, 1292–1361), whose unique systematization of Buddhist doctrine in the fourteenth century came to be one of the most influential, and controversial, in Tibet. His theory of emptiness is clearly elucidated in his *magnum opus*, the *Ocean of Definitive Meaning*. In this text, Dölpopa delineates emptiness in two ways: “self-emptiness” and “other-emptiness.” Self-emptiness is a phenomena's lack (its emptiness) in reference to itself while other-emptiness is a lack (emptiness) with reference to another. In his own words, Dölpopa delineates these two types of emptiness as follows: “That which exists within reality is other-empty, and that which does not exist within reality is self-empty.”¹

What is other-empty exists within reality; it is real and empty of what is other—the unreal. What is self-empty is not real; it is false and absent in reality. In this way, he makes an appearance/reality distinction between ultimate and relative truth. He further states: “The emptiness of own entity is the relative self-emptiness. . . the emptiness of another entity is the ultimate other-emptiness.”² He thus characterizes: (1) “relative self-emptiness” as the absent phenomena in a location and (2) “ultimate other-emptiness” as the remaining location of the absence. As such, the empty ground, or substrate, is the ultimate truth; and that which this ultimate ground is empty of, the phenomenal world of relative truth, is the absent *quality* of that substrate.

Relative phenomena are said to be “self-empty,” they are lacking with reference not to something extrinsic to themselves, but are empty of their own respective essences. The ultimate truth is the ground of reality that is not empty of itself, but empty of all relative phenomena. This ground is thus said to be “other-empty.” In this way, the Jonang tradition circumscribes an absolute, ineffable reality through the language of other-emptiness. Their denial of the world and affirmation of such an absolute truth has been a source of controversy; they have been accused as being non-Buddhists and even crypto-Vedāntins.

¹ Dölpopa (1976, p. 194.6).

² Ibid., p. 300.5–300.6.

Before proceeding further to two other representations of emptiness, I will first turn to address negation. Emptiness is a lack, and thus to understand emptiness we should address what is negated by emptiness (and also, what is not).

Rooted within the grammatical traditions of Sanskrit, we find two types of negation in Tibetan philosophical literature: “implicative negations” (*ma yin dgag*) and “non-implicative negations” (*med dgag*). In Tibetan exegesis, an implicative negation is characterized as an explicit negation that implicates something else; for instance, like the classic example, “the fat Devadatta does not eat during the day.”³ This negation implies something else, namely, that the fat Devadatta eats at night. For Dölpopa’s Jonang tradition, the ultimate truth is represented by an implicative negation. Relative phenomena are negated, but not ultimate reality—the ultimate ground of reality is implied by the negation of all relative phenomena.

A non-implicative negation, by contrast, does not imply anything else through the negation, for instance in the following example: “Brahmins should not drink alcohol.” In contrast to an implicative negation, the connotative force of a non-implicative negation is denial rather than an implied affirmation. We will see that the Geluk tradition insists that emptiness is a non-implicative negation, not an implicative negation. The preference for implicative versus non-implicative negations in terms of indicating ultimate truth comes down to the problem of how an ineffable reality can be indicated by language. Using an implicative negation to represent ultimate truth presumes that there is something implied by the language of negation; such as the *apriori* existence of a locative ground presumed to be a fundamental part of any world of discourse. In the case of the Jonang, the presence of such an ultimate ground is the noumenal realm of ultimate truth. In their tradition, this ultimate ground—as an ineffable reality that is unassailably real—is disclosed by an implicative negation.

In contrast, non-implicative negations are the preferred indicators of the ultimate truth by those who presume no such ground, such as the followers of the Geluk tradition. In the predominant Geluk tradition, not only is an implicit metaphysical ground not presumed as the ultimate substance of reality, but that very presumption of such an absolute, ineffable substance is seen as precisely what is to be negated. Nothing remains and all such grounds and substances are denied in a non-implicative negation. As such, in the Geluk interpretation of emptiness as a non-implicative negation, ultimate truth is represented not as *ground*, but as ground-less—an *abyss*. We will now look further into the way emptiness is represented in the Geluk tradition.

Emptiness in Geluk

Tsongkhapa (*tsong kha pa blo bzang grags pa*, 1357–1419) and his Geluk followers have been major critics of the Jonang, the emblematic tradition of

³ Sanskrit Grammarians (i.e., Patañjali’s *Mahābhāṣya*) described the distinction between the two negations as follows: the non-implicative negation (*prasajya-pratiṣedha*) is what negates a verb, and the predicative negation (*paryudāsa-pratiṣedha*) is what negates a noun. Grammarians also noted that predicative negations can be put into a compound (*samāsa*) and non-implicative negations cannot. See Matilal (1992, p. 267, 1985, pp. 399–400).

other-emptiness. In contrast to the Jonang depiction of emptiness, Tsongkhapa consistently argued that the ultimate truth is necessarily a *mere absence*. He maintained that emptiness must be understood exclusively as a non-implicative negation, a negation that does not imply anything. As such, the ultimate truth is just an absence; it has no positive implications of a metaphysical presence.

The emptiness of one thing in another—like a cup’s emptiness of water—is not the meaning of emptiness according to a Geluk view. Rather, emptiness refers to a phenomenon’s lack of inherent existence. Tsongkhapa states this clearly in his commentary on the *Madhayamakāvātāra*: “The ultimate truth is posited as solely the negation of truth [that is, inherent existence] upon a subject that is a basis of negation. . . .”⁴ According to his view, no true ontological basis for anything is findable. Even emptiness is not found when analyzed. Emptiness itself is not a real substrate; hence, it is not to be reified as a metaphysical entity; rather, emptiness itself is empty—as is stated by “the emptiness of emptiness.” Thus, in this Geluk view, emptiness is a *quality* of all phenomena; emptiness is even a quality of emptiness itself.

However, for Tsongkhapa, the fact that phenomena are empty does not mean that they do not exist at all. Rather, they exist *conventionally*. Tsongkhapa states: “If a pot were empty of pot, a pot would have to be nonexistent in itself, and if it were nonexistent in itself, it would be nonexistent everywhere else, too; therefore, a pot would [absurdly] be utterly nonexistent.”⁵ For Tsongkhapa, emptiness is not a denial of conventional reality; conventional phenomena exist, pots and cups of water exist. They are also empty, that is, they lack any sort of true nature or inherent existence. Emptiness is *just* the lack of inherent existence of those phenomena; it is a *quality* that conventionally existent phenomena have. In this way, rather than emptiness being a substrate of phenomena, conventionally existent phenomena are the substrate, or *substrates*, for emptiness: each phenomenon instantiates emptiness, which is that particular phenomenon’s lack of inherent existence.

In this Geluk representation of emptiness, emptiness is not a metaphysical referent; it is simply a phenomenon’s lack of essence. There is nothing beyond phenomena; there are only qualities without any real substrate. In their nominalist system, substance is nothing more than the supposed referent of language, yet there is no real basis of designation. Tsongkhapa does not represent emptiness as a metaphysical ground of reality, but simply as a quality of phenomena—like the quality of the redness of a red shirt, or the quality of wetness in water. All phenomena are said to share this quality of emptiness.

Thus, we can see that in the Jonang tradition, the ultimate is represented as a *substrate* of phenomena, and in the Geluk tradition, as a *quality* of phenomena. These two interpretations can be traced to two interpretations of emptiness from the Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras, in particular, the sixteenth emptiness in a list that begins with (1) the emptiness of the external, (2) the emptiness of the internal, (3) the emptiness of the external and internal and so forth up until the sixteenth, *abhāvasvabhāva-sūnyatā* (*dnegos po med pa’i dnegos bo nyid kyi stong pa nyid*). The key lies in the

⁴ Tsongkhapa (1979, p. 396.6).

⁵ Tsongkhapa (1998, p. 213).

relationship between *abhāvasvabhāva*- “the nature of nonentities” and *-sūnyatā* “emptiness”: Candrakīrti interprets this as “the emptiness *of* the nature of nonentities,” in his autocommentary of the *Madhyamakāvatāra*, while Yogācāra commentaries on the *Madhyāntavibhāga* treat it differently, as “the emptiness *that is* the nature of nonentities,” with a more positive connotation.⁶ We can see how the former interpretation (emptiness *of* the nature of nonentities) treats emptiness as a quality (an adjective), while the latter (emptiness *that is* the nature of nonentities), by taking the genitive *tat-puruṣa* compound as a *karmadhāraya*, can be taken such that emptiness becomes a substantive (a noun). The distinction here between emptiness interpreted as a substrate or a quality—or in other words, whether “ineffable” is understood as a noun or an adjective—reflects the respective interpretations of emptiness in the competing Madhyamaka traditions of the Yogācāra and the Prāsaṅgika (that is, Prāsaṅgika as articulated by Tsongkhapa). Also, the distinction has an important place in the “self-emptiness” versus “other-emptiness” debates in Tibet.

Emptiness in Nyingma

A third meaning of emptiness can be seen within the Nyingma tradition formulated by Mipam (*’ju mi pham rgya mtsho*, 1846–1912). In a similar way that Tsongkhapa criticized “other-emptiness,” the representation of ultimate emptiness in the Jonang tradition, Mipam criticizes the Geluk representation of ultimate emptiness as solely an absence. In contrast to both the Jonang and Geluk interpretations of emptiness, Mipam portrays ultimate emptiness as a *unity* of appearance and emptiness—as empty appearance.⁷

Mipam interprets emptiness as unity in distinction to two interpretations of emptiness that he criticizes as being “partial”: (1) as a substrate of reality

⁶ The sixteen emptinesses are: (1) the emptiness of the internal, (2) the emptiness of the external, (3) the emptiness of the external and internal, (4) the emptiness of the great, (5) the emptiness of emptiness, (6) the emptiness of the ultimate, (7) the emptiness of the conditioned, (8) the emptiness of the unconditioned, (9) the emptiness of the limitless, (10) the emptiness the beginningless and endless, (11) the emptiness of the non-discarded, (12) the emptiness of intrinsic nature, (13) the emptiness of own characteristics, (14) the emptiness of all phenomena, (15) the emptiness of nonentities, and (16) the emptiness which is the nature of nonentities. Mipam states that the last two subsume the first fourteen, and that the fifteenth, the emptiness of nonentities (*dnegos po med pa’i stong pa nyid*), is a negation of perceived-perceiver duality through exclusion (*rnam bcad du khegs*), and the sixteenth, the emptiness that is the nature of nonentities (*dnegos po med pa’i dnegos bo nyid kyi stong pa nyid*), is established through inclusion (*yongs gcod du grub*). Mipam, *Garland of Light Rays: Commentary on the Madhyāntavibhāga*, 673.5–674.1; 679.3–679.5. See Vasubandhu’s commentary of the *Madhyāntavibhāga*, D.4027 (Vol. 77), 131.1.3; and Sthiramati’s commentary, D.4032 (Vol. 77), pp. 234.2.3–234.3.6. There is a variation in the enumeration of sixteen emptinesses cited by Candrakīrti (1999) in *Madhyamakāvatāra* VI.180–223. Candrakīrti cites “the emptiness of the unobserved” (*mi dmigs pa stong pa nyid*) for the fifteenth instead of “the emptiness of nonentities” as in the *Madhyāntavibhāga*.

⁷ Mipam apparently draws upon the Sakya (*sa skya*) scholar, Gorampa (*go rams pa bsod nams seng ge*, 1429–1489), and his juxtaposition of the Geluk and Jonang as extremes to forge a middle way between. Yet while Gorampa emphasized that the ultimate truth is nonconceptual, Mipam emphasizes emptiness as unity. For a presentation of Gorampa’s views contrasted with the Geluk and Jonang, see Gorampa, *Distinguishing the Views*; English translation in Cabezón and Dargyay (2007).

(i.e., emptiness as an ultimate metaphysical ground separate from phenomena) and (2) as a quality (i.e., emptiness as phenomenon's lack of inherent existence). In contrast to these interpretations, he highlights another meaning of emptiness: as the unity of (relative) appearance and (ultimate) emptiness.

Mipam distinguishes his interpretation of emptiness from the metaphysical realism of traditions that reify the ultimate as a substance. He also distinguishes his view of emptiness from a reified quality of absence. We can see this in the following passage where he states that:

Just as the assertion of the absence of true existence can become an incorrigible view of emptiness as a reified sign of a nonentity, similarly, the assertion of the nonconceptual (*spros bral*) can become an incorrigible view in which emptiness is a referent object of an ineffable entity.⁸

He consistently emphasizes that the actual meaning of emptiness is beyond mental and linguistic reference. An important way that he does this is by underscoring the radical distinction between the emptiness that is conceptually known and the emptiness that is beyond the domain of word and thought.

He calls the former, conceptually known emptiness the “categorized ultimate.” The “categorized ultimate” (*rnam grangs pa'i don dam*) refers to a mere absence as a negative representation of the ultimate. In contrast to this concept of nonexistence, he calls what is beyond any conceptual constructs the “uncategorized ultimate” (*rnam grangs ma yin pa'i don dam*).⁹ He describes the uncategorized ultimate as having no linguistic or conceptual referent; it is neither an affirmation nor a negation and is beyond the substrate/quality dichotomy. While preserving an ultimate truth that can be conceptually discerned—as expressible in terms of syllogism and determinate through analytical inquiry—he aims to sustain a transcendent quality of the absolute as *uncategorized* to “signify” another meaning of emptiness that is not conceptually accessible. He states:

Ultimate truth which is categorized—merely a negation as an absence of true establishment—is an object of mind and an object of language. The uncategorized is the unity of appearance and emptiness that does not fall to the side of either appearance or emptiness. It is signified by the words such as ‘unity of the two truths,’ ‘beyond conceptual constructs,’ and ‘the Middle Way,’ but these are merely indicators, like the finger pointing to the moon, the meaning is far beyond the domain of language and mind.¹⁰

⁸ Mipam (1987b), *Lion's Roar: Affirming Other-Emptiness*, pp. 368.4–368.5.

⁹ I use the terms “categorized” and “uncategorized,” following Thomas Doctor, to reflect the distinctive way that Mipam glosses the etymology of the term *rnam grangs*. Mipam states: “The categorized ultimate is ‘categorized’ because it is counted as one in a pair, the binary counterpart of relative existence, or, because it is included in the category of the ultimate. It is what is categorized as the binary counterpart of the relative when speaking of ‘two truths.’” Mipam, *Words That Delight Guru Mañjuḥoṣa*, published in Thomas Doctor, trans. (2004), *Speech of Delight*, 62: *rnam grangs pa'i don dam ni/ kun rdzob yod pa'i zla la sbyar ba'i cig shos kyi zlas drangs pa'i phyir ram/ don dam pa'i grangs su gtogs pas na rnam grangs te/ bden pa gnyis zhes pa'i kun rdzob kyi zlar bgrang rgyu de yin*.

¹⁰ Mipam (1990, pp. 57–58).

Whereas the categorized ultimate is known within a conceptual framework, there is no such framework to demarcate the ineffable, uncategorized ultimate. As such, its meaning defies affirmation and negation, and any other determinate conceptual formulation.

Also, Mipam emphasizes that emptiness is not only a mere absence because appearance is inseparably wed to emptiness. Although he acknowledges that the quality of absence is the conceptual meaning of emptiness, since emptiness also appears (because there is no actual emptiness apart from appearance), he explicitly affirms another meaning of emptiness: the unity of appearance and emptiness as a single unified truth.¹¹ These two meanings of emptiness: (1) as absence and (2) as unity are important to differentiate.

He states that a conceptually known emptiness is merely the empty quality of appearance. However, such an absence is an abstraction from the actual truth of the unified reality of empty appearance, which is the consummate meaning of emptiness. In this way, he presents a meaning of emptiness that contrasts with both the Jonang and Geluk representations; he represents emptiness as distinct from (1) emptiness as an empty *substrate* distinct from appearance and (2) emptiness as an absent *quality* distinct from appearance.

His representation of emptiness contrasts with the “other-emptiness” championed by the Jonang tradition because he clearly states that the quality of emptiness is not adequately indicated by an implicative negation: he says that such a negation implies something else to the mind, another entity for the mind to conceive and fixate upon.¹² His representation of emptiness is also different from the way the Geluk tradition interprets emptiness as an absent *quality*, a (non-implicative) negation, due to the fact that Mipam’s interpretation of emptiness—as united with appearance—has a positive cast to its meaning.¹³ The presence of this unity is not a noumenal ground of reality that is an ineffable substance behind an unreal world, but is simply empty appearance itself.

Conclusion

To summarize and conclude, with Dölpopa’s Jonang tradition we saw a distinction between “other-emptiness” and “self-emptiness” and a preference for “other-emptiness”: ultimate reality that is empty of relative phenomena. For the Jonang tradition, ultimate reality is pure and unchanging. It is the noumenal world of a metaphysical reality, an absolute reality that is “empty” in the sense that it lacks all that is other—all the unreal, impermanent phenomena that comprise the deluded world—but this ultimate reality is not empty of itself; it is the ineffable ground of reality.

In contrast, the Geluk tradition following Tsongkhapa criticizes the metaphysical realism of the Jonang tradition. The Geluk tradition consistently argues that the

¹¹ See Mipam (1997, p. 51).

¹² Mipam (1993, p. 10).

¹³ See Mipam (1990, p. 88).

ultimate truth is necessarily a mere absence and nothing more; it should not be treated as another substance. According to their tradition, emptiness itself is empty; thus, it has no real referent and is certainly not a metaphysical presence that is above and beyond phenomenal reality. Rather, emptiness simply means the *absence* of inherent existence in any particular phenomenon.

A third meaning of emptiness is articulated in Mipam's Nyingma tradition. Mipam delineates two notions of emptiness—as substrate and as quality—which he shows to be both determinate conceptions of emptiness that are part of a conceptual and linguistic framework. He then offers another representation of emptiness that purports to go beyond this framework by emphasizing that the actual meaning of emptiness is inconceivable as the unity of appearance and emptiness. We can see how emptiness can be respectively characterized in these three traditions as (1) a substrate (Jonang), (2) a quality (Geluk), and (3) an inconceivable unity (Nyingma).

Like Gorampa (*go rams pa bsod nams seng ge*, 1429–1489), an influential scholar of the Sakya (*sa skya*) tradition, Mipam rejected predominant features of the Jonang and Geluk depictions of emptiness.¹⁴ However, in contrast to Gorampa's harsh critiques of Tsongkhapa and Dölpopa, Mipam brings together aspects of both these traditions' interpretation. By incorporating elements of both the Jonang and Geluk interpretations, he uses their representations to clarify the boundaries of emptiness. In doing so, he delimits (1) an emptiness that is knowable and expressible (i.e., emptiness as “absence” in Geluk and “other-emptiness” in Jonang) from (2) the (consummate) meaning of emptiness that he depicts as transgressing the boundaries of what can be known and expressed. Through clearly delineating these two types of emptiness—the emptiness that can be known and that which cannot—Mipam aims to sustain analytical rigor and the critique of substance by means of the former while preserving the presence of an extra-linguistic meaning in the latter. Identifying this distinction here between (1) the emptiness that is conceived and (2) the emptiness that is inconceivable is a central concern for Buddhists because it is the boundary between the genuine, nonconceptual emptiness and its distorted conceptual construction.

Through better understanding the nuances of the meanings ascribed to emptiness in these three Buddhist traditions, we can appreciate a fuller picture of the semantic range of emptiness and the contours of the ultimate truth in Buddhism. Also, we come to acknowledge that speaking of *the meaning* of emptiness, as if it had only one meaning, is problematic. Since there are different representations of emptiness found even within the Buddhist traditions of Tibet (not to mention India, China, Japan, etc.), it becomes necessary to speak of Buddhist emptiness with reference to a particular context—the interpretative community, person, or text, where the term is used. Thereby, we can better communicate enigmatic topics such as emptiness with more clarity and precision, and become more fully equipped to address the issues at stake in the discourses about emptiness.

In spite of the differences among these three traditions' discourses on emptiness, however, it is a mistake to overlook their similarities. We can see the similarities when we look beyond the indigenous language of “self-emptiness”

¹⁴ See footnote 7.

versus “other-emptiness” and “categorized” versus “uncategorized” ultimates to see that all three traditions accept that: (1) the undistorted perception of ultimate truth is not the distorted appearance of relative truth (“other-emptiness”), (2) relative phenomena are not found when their ultimate nature is analyzed (“self-emptiness”), and (3) emptiness in essence is inexpressible (“the uncategorized ultimate”). These traditions represent emptiness in three distinct ways—as a substrate, a quality, and an ineffable unity; the difference lies not in whether the ineffable *can* be expressed, but rather in *how* it is best articulated.

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