



A Short
Introduction to
Buddhist Tenets
Preliminary reading





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Introduction

“Tenet: a principle, belief, or doctrine generally held to be true, especially one held in common by members of an organization, movement, or profession.”
(Merriam-Webster dictionary)

As you learned in the previous document, *A Short Introduction to Buddhism*, the teachings of the Buddha gave rise to many different systems and interpretations. All Buddhist scholars share some fundamental beliefs, such as the four noble truths, emptiness/selflessness, and the possibility to find enlightenment and liberation. However, different schools of thought have come up with gradually more nuanced and subtler ways of interpreting these concepts. This, in turn, led to the development of different systems of tenets. This is similar to the evolution of scientific theories: throughout the centuries, scientists have developed different models of reality, which have been developed and refined through experimental and theoretical research.

One key theme here, which will recur throughout the course, is the difference between reality and appearance: what is fundamentally real? And what is just an illusory appearance, a projection of the mind? Another key concept is that of "selflessness": what does it mean that there is no self? What is the basis through which our experience of a solid self arises?

This document outlines how four different Buddhist schools have tried to answer these questions: the Great Exposition school, the Sutra school, the Mind-Only school, and the Middle-Way school. You do not need an extensive knowledge of all these theories in order to complete the course: this outline is meant as a roadmap to help you navigate the different points of view discussed throughout the course.

In reading this text, it is useful to keep in mind that these schools adopt gradually subtler views of reality. The first two schools have a *realist* outlook, as they believe in the existence of elemental entities. While denying the existence of the self ("selflessness of persons"), they believe in an objective existence of physical phenomena. The Mind-Only school, on the other hand, considers the mind to be real, while objects do not have any independent existence. Therefore, it is an *idealist* school. The Middle-Way school, finally, claims that the mind, too, is a relative entity, *transcending both idealism and realism*. In addition to the selflessness of persons, the last two schools argue that phenomena themselves do not possess an intrinsic existence ("selflessness of phenomena").



Great Exposition School (Vaibhāṣika)

According to this interpretation, the world is ultimately composed of infinitesimally small particles. These are the only concrete and inherently existing entities: on the contrary, mental processes and physical objects have no intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*). They arise from the elemental components through the process of dependent origination and therefore exist “in name only”.

This view is somewhat similar to classical physics, which sees material particles (neutrons, protons, electrons) as the fundamental building blocks of nature. You may be familiar, for example, with the typical representation of an atom with seemingly solid electrons orbiting in definite trajectories around a central core.

But unlike classical physics, this interpretation of the Great Exposition School also extends to mental phenomena. According to Great Exposition scholars, every experience can be partitioned into shorter and shorter fragments, until a “quantum” of consciousness is reached that cannot be partitioned any further. This includes also the experience of a “self”, which is considered to be a relative perception, an illusion projected upon a stream of (elemental) experiences.



Sutra School (Sautrāntika)

The Sutra school developed from the Great Exposition school around the 2nd or 3rd century CE. As hinted by its name, this school relies on canonical Buddhist scriptures (*sutra*) as an ultimate source of authority in philosophical matters. One of this school's major contributions is the development of Buddhist logic and epistemology through the works of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti (whose ideas you will encounter in Module 3).

Like the Great Exposition School, the Sutra School can be considered *realist*: it asserts that objects exist “out there” and are the cause of our perceptions. The world exists independently of the minds that perceive it, but the categories that we use to think about it are pure mental fabrications. They are not inherently existing properties of real objects, but only artifacts of our cognition. For example, labels such as “hot” or “cold” do not have an intrinsic existence in reality, but are projected by our minds unto existing entities such as fire or ice. Similarly, what we perceive as our “self” is only an idea, a mental fabrication projected upon existing phenomena (the body and the mind).



Mind-Only School (Yogācāra or Cittāmatra)

The name of the Mind-Only school comes from an early Mahāyāna sutra, the Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra, which states that the objects of perceptions are not different from the mind that perceives them: they are *citta-mātra*, "only mind". What we perceive as external objects are purely mental phenomena, and they do not exist independently from cognitive processes.

Like other schools, proponents of the Mind-Only schools see external and internal phenomena as arising through dependent origination from causes and conditions; but unlike the Great Exposition and Sutra schools, they argue that these causes are mental, rather than physical, in their nature.

The central idea of this school is that our everyday dualistic experience of ourselves as separate from the world is just an illusion. Objects and other people appear to be "out there", separate from our consciousness; but according to Mind-Only philosophers, all phenomena are fundamentally one with the consciousness that apprehends them. They are "empty" of existing independently from the mind, and this emptiness is seen as a "thoroughly established phenomenon".

To a certain extent, this view can be linked to some interpretations of quantum mechanics that will be discussed during the course, such as QBism or the Van Neumann-Wigner interpretation. More broadly, the difference between the Mind-Only school and realist schools (*Sutra* and Great Exposition) can be compared to the difference between quantum and classical physics. While classical physics considers the world to exist independently from observation, in quantum physics the observer plays a key role in determining the properties of physical systems, as you will learn during the course



Middle-Way School (Mādhyamaka or Mādhyamika)

The "middle way" in this school's name refers to taking a balanced view which is free of two extreme viewpoints: absolutism (the idea that phenomena exist in an intrinsic and independent way) and nihilism (the idea that nothing exists at all). Middle-Way scholars avoid these two extremes by stating that nothing exists independently, but phenomena still exist in the nature of dependent origination. As all that exists is dependently arisen, all phenomena are empty of independent existence.

The Middle-Way school recognises three different levels of interdependence: dependence on parts and collections of parts (which is also recognised by other schools), dependence on causes and conditions, and dependence on the mind, that projects a label unto parts and the causes that brought them together.

All other schools of tenets take some entity as intrinsically and independently existing, such as elementary particles (Great Exposition school), external phenomena (*Sutra* school), or thoroughly established phenomena (i.e., emptiness/selflessness - the Mind-Only school).

According to Middle-Way scholars, all other schools fall into the extreme of absolutism because they claim that reality has a concrete, solid, substantial foundation. By contrast, the Middle-Way school argues that nothing can exist without depending on something else. This is also true of "universal" categories, such as space, time, or causation, and even emptiness itself is considered to be empty of existing intrinsically.

The ideas that properties of the world are not independently existing, but arise through the relation between physical systems, is central to Prof. Carlo Rovelli's interpretation of quantum mechanics, which will be discussed during this e-Course. This interpretation resonates deeply with Middle-Way philosophy, and Prof. Rovelli himself was deeply influenced by the works of the founder of the Middle-Way school: Nāgārjuna.