

**THE THEORY AND PRACTICE
OF OTHER EMPTINESS TAUGHT
THROUGH MILAREPA'S SONGS**

BY TONY DUFF

PADMA KARPO TRANSLATION COMMITTEE

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AN EXCERPT FROM THE INTRODUCTION

About Other Emptiness

(...)

The Name “Empty of Other” and its Meaning

The Tibetan name “zhantong” literally meaning “empty of other”¹ was invented for convenience when speaking of the ultimate meaning of the third turning of the wheel teachings. It was originally coined by the Tibetan yogin Yumowa Mikyo Dorje whose followers became known as the Jonang school. And it was later brought into mainstream use by a throne holder of the Jonang school, Dolpopa Sherab Gyaltsen. After that, it was used in two ways. Firstly, it was used as a name for other emptiness, the situation of being empty of other.

¹ The original phrase in Tibetan was “gzhan gyis stong pa” meaning “empty of other”. That was shortened to “gzhan stong” with the same meaning. In English it can be written as “other empty” or “other emptiness” or “emptiness of other”.

Secondly, it was used as a proper name for both the system of teachings that taught being other emptiness and the schools which followed that teaching.

The source of the name “empty of other” has been used to claim that the system of Other Emptiness is not valid. Because the name was a Tibetan invention, the opponents of Other Emptiness have been quick to point out that the name was not used by the Buddha, therefore the teaching could not be valid. However, their argument is simplistic—when the teachings of the third turning given by the Buddha and by his personally appointed regent, Maitreya, are carefully examined, the meaning “empty of other” is clearly visible within in them, even if the exact phrase is not used. For example, the *Highest Continuum* by Maitreya, says:

The element, sugatagarbha, is empty of that which
has the characteristic of being separable
The adventitious stains ...

The phrase there, “sugatagarbha is empty of that which has the characteristic of being separable”, is equivalent to “sugatagarbha is empty of that which has the characteristic of being separable because its entity is other than that of sugatagarbha”, which is the meaning exactly of “empty of other”.

When “other emptiness” is used as the name for a type of emptiness, it is used in a specific way. Emptiness of self was taught in relation to all persons and all phenomena, whereas emptiness of other was only taught in relation to the core of mind, sugatagarbha. The exact meaning of the emptiness of other, then, is that “the element of innate wisdom present in

every being as the sugatagarbha is *empty of everything* which is *other* than its own entity”. And note that, when Yumowa Mikyo Dorje first used the Tibetan words “empty of other”, that is exactly how he used them.

When Other Emptiness is used as the name of a teaching, it refers to a very profound teaching focussed on wisdom which can be found in both the third and fourth turnings of the wheel of dharma. It is generally understood that the third turning teaches that there is a seed of enlightenment in all sentient beings and because of that all sentient beings can become enlightened. Other Emptiness goes further by also accepting that certain sūtras of the third turning, called “the heart meaning sūtras”² point out that the seed of enlightenment is wisdom which could be accessed directly. The reason for that is that the entity of sugatagarbha does not have the entity of samsaric mind in it.

The samsaric mind that pops up on the surface of wisdom and disappears again is a surface event which is not part of the wisdom itself. Therefore, it is referred to in the third turning sūtras as the “adventitious stains” appearing on the surface of sugatagarbha. Saying that it is an “adventitious” stain on the surface of sugatagarbha is equivalent to saying that it is other than the entity of wisdom. The fact that wisdom is empty of what is other than it means that adventitious samsaric mind can simply be dropped and wisdom can be emptied. How-

² Followers of Other Emptiness generally accept twenty, sometimes reduced to a short list of ten, sūtras which for them show the heart meaning of all the Buddha’s sūtras. They are therefore called the “the group of heart meaning sūtras”.

ever, emptying it of what is in essence a fiction does not mean that there is nothing left. The process of emptying results in wisdom becoming manifest.

The real teaching of Other Emptiness is that wisdom exists and can be manifested. It is shown clearly in a set of three verses in the *Highest Continuum*, one of which contains the line quoted just above:

The superfact of self-arising occurrence
Is what the faithful are to realize.
The sun's disk blazing with light
Being seen without the eye, there is no seeing.

For this, there is nothing at all to be removed
And not the slightest thing to be added.
If an authentic view applied to the authentic itself
Results in its being authentically seen, there is
complete liberation.

The element, sugatagarbha, is empty of that which
has the characteristic of being separable,
The adventitious stains; it is not that it is empty
Of that which has the characteristic of being
inseparable,
The unsurpassable dharmas.

In short, if you say it directly, the one thing that spiritually inclined sentient beings must do is realize the self-existing, superior fact of reality. They must see their own wisdom which blazes brilliant as the sun. This happens by wisdom seeing itself, not the usual process of seeing with the eyes. In order for wisdom to see itself, the path of meditation to be

followed is one in which nothing is to be eliminated and nothing is to be newly added; the wisdom is allowed simply to realize itself. That sort of path will work precisely because the things which are normally regarded as something to be removed—all the superficial slime and muck of samsara—are not really part of the wisdom and hence can be allowed to subside of themselves and because the things which are normally regarded as something to be developed through practising the spiritual path—all the unsurpassable good qualities of enlightened being—are contained within the wisdom already, so can simply be allowed to manifest.

The ultimate summation is found in two very famous lines from the *Hevajra Tantra*:

Sentient beings are buddha itself,
But are obscured by adventitious stains.

Two Emptinesses are an Essential Part of the Other Emptiness Teaching

A crucial point about the Other Emptiness system of teaching is that it does not reject the emptiness of self taught in the second turning of the wheel in favour of the emptiness of other which it finds in the third turning. Instead, it regards the emptiness of self taught in the second turning as an indispensable step towards the emptiness of other taught in the third turning. This is a key point of the view of Other Emptiness and has to be understood by anyone who wants to follow that system as a practical path to enlightenment.

(introduction continues ...)



Tony Duff has spent a lifetime pursuing the Buddha's teaching and transmitting it to others. In the early 1970's, during his post-graduate studies in molecular biology, he went to Asia and met the Buddhist teachings of various South-east Asian countries. He met Tibetan Buddhism in Nepal and has followed it since. After his trip he abandoned worldly life and was the first monk ordained in his home country of Australia. Together with several others, he founded the monastery called Chenrezig Institute for Wisdom Culture where he studied and practised the Gelugpa teachings for several years under the guidance of Lama Yeshe, Lama Zopa, Geshe Lodan, and Zasep Tulku. After that, he offered back his ordination and left for the USA to study the Kagyu teachings with the incomparable Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche. Tony was very active in the community and went through all possible levels of training that were available during his twelve year stay. He was also a core member of the Nalanda Translation Committee. After Chogyam Trungpa died, Tony went to live in Nepal where he worked as the personal translator for Tsoknyi Rinpoche and also translated for several other well-known teachers. He also founded and directed the largest Tibetan text preservation project in Asia, the Drukpa Kagyu Heritage Project, which he oversaw for eight years. He also established the Padma Karpo Translation Committee which has produced many fine translations and made many resources for translators such as the highly acclaimed *Illuminator Tibetan-English Dictionary*. After the year 2000, Tony focussed primarily on obtaining Dzogchen teachings from the best teachers available, especially within Tibet, and translating and teaching them. He has received much approval from many teachers and has been given the titles "lotsawa" and "lama" and been strongly encouraged by them to teach Westerners. One way he does that is by producing these fine translations.

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