

## A Review of the Madhyamaka Course by Alex Trisoglio

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Recently, a student of Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche, Alex Trisoglio, presented the internet general public with a course on the *Madhyamakavatara*<sup>1</sup> by Chandrakirti.

With full endorsement from Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche, and thus backed by an impeccable lineage, Mr. Trisoglio was indeed very generous in making a course like this available. It includes a very comprehensive website with ample reading recommendations, around 14h of video teachings (audio only is also available), a forum and a session of questions and answers (now closed). Mr. Trisoglio was also able to present all of that totally for free, which indicates a pure offering of dharma, work and veneration to the lineage; a true joy for all who have a glimpse of the rarity and profundity of dharma.

Mr. Trisoglio qualifications are magnificent. In particular, he had previously made a book presentation of a many years cycle of Rinpoche's *Madhyamakavatara* teachings, with a very clear professional preparation of the text, also including a very useful sort of flowchart modernizing the Tibetan traditional *sa bcad* (structural outline of a text or argument). He has a background on physics, computer science and leadership and is a highly articulated and well versed connoisseur of both popular and scholarly western culture. Mr. Trisoglio also very evidently portrays in his demeanor the excellent qualities of dharma training, something particularly highlighted by the courteous and elegant treatment he dispensed to all who subscribed to participate in this course,

totaling around 2000 people from all over the world.

The *Madhyamakavatara*, written around the years 600 to 650, is an important *shastra* (commentary) which Tibetans elevated as the central text about the middle-way view. The word *view* here is important since the other commonly used word, *philosophy*, might entail a certain Eurocentric perspective, even though the actual Sanskrit word used in this context, *siddhanta*, would imply, more than that, a doctrine, *doxa* or tenet-system. The fact is that the middle-way view is sometimes said to be a “viewless-view”, a non-philosophy or non-doxa which frees even the most subtle Buddhist tenets from reification; all the Buddha's teachings, even emptiness itself, are shown to be empty—not independent, but *interdependent*. The middle-way is a proclamation, above all, of the expediency of all Buddhist proclamations, indicating the selfless (essenceless, borderless) nature of transmission (by language or otherwise), and by extension, of the Buddha's teachings. It is actually *because* they have such nature, being flexible and sturdy, free from the extremes of rigidity and flimsiness, that the Buddha and his teachings can be truly liberating.

The *Madhyamakavatara* (*Introduction to the Middle-way*) is a commentary on the *Mulamadhyamakakarika* by Nagarjuna, which itself is a commentary on the *Prajnaparamita* Sutras. This is a refined classical presentation of Mahayana teachings, and still part of the foundational curriculum in all Tibetan monastic institutions, being also at the core of vast scores of polemic literature in Tibet.

Mr. Trisoglio presentation followed Rinpoche's lineage, using the commentaries by Mipam Rinpoche (Nyingma tradition) and

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<sup>1</sup> <https://madhyamaka.com>

Gorampa (Sakya tradition), which mostly agree between themselves.<sup>2</sup> Mr. Trisoglio wisely didn't touch on the complex controversies around such interpretations and the mainstream Gelug tradition (even though some of his recommended readings followed that interpretation, there was no time to go into that degree of detail).

In fact, even while recommending a blatantly scholarly list of readings, Mr. Trisoglio repeatedly warned of the perils of holding the dharma as a subject of academic scrutiny. His expressed goal was to help us develop the *view* (the viewless-view, that is) in order to better *practice* dharma. Many times he reminded us of Rinpoche's teaching that intellectually establishing the view is around 2% of the work—very important 2%—but that the main transformation happens in the 98% of integrating that view in both formal and day-to-day practice.

My own opinion is that this strange dichotomy—avoiding a too dry or armchair a study while at the same time leveling it with learned western perspectives (both academic views on dharma and, in the actual classes, also illustrations of the teachings with certain literary quotes from the western canon)—was both the main downfall and charming characteristic of the program.

So it seemed we had the freedom to be completely stuck in our heads, as long as we were talking about philosophy of mind, science or some of the favored western poetic add-ons, but when we tried to bring some classic dharma debate to the table, we always felt a bit like “troublemakers”, accused of too much conceptuality, and trying to needlessly complicate the subject. At least I felt that way at the forum.

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<sup>2</sup> The main difference being that Gorampa used tantric texts in his argumentation for the Sutrayana point of view of the *Madhyamakavatara*, something that is perceived as inelegant by Gelug commentators (using a higher teaching to explain a lower one, which is a necessary basis for the higher one). Mipam tried to fix that, and also presented in parallel to that what he thought to be the distinct Nyingma interpretation.

## Science and *pramana*

Chandrakirti's flavor of middle-way is a totally nonconceptual freedom from conceptual extremes which still remains open to the conventions of common people. His main adversaries are those Buddhists who build systems to justify or explain emptiness from the perspective of some sort of “private” reasoning, which would be a form of reifying the very logic they are using as something independent, ultimately existing. Since logic ends not being recognized as empty, it itself imprisons them.

My discussions with Mr. Trisoglio (now not publicly available, since the forum was closed) ended up being mostly about how current notions of science should be treated according to Chandrakirti's view. According to Mr. Trisoglio, science is some sort of “common people convention”, that is, what Chandrakirti calls, as a compliment, “cowherd”. As such, science is not an obstacle both to the dharma of realization (the non-conceptuality beyond extremes), nor to dharma path, the set of “pure” conventions engineered to that result.

Since science is not speculative, but empirical, it is totally fine from the relative perspective. Speculation, on the other hand, would lock us out in some sort of disease of philosophy—endless and fruitless conceptualization, the main foundation of *samsara*.

In this way, science as a purely empirical non-speculative activity is totally compatible with dharma. Mr. Trisoglio has quoted Dzongsar Rinpoche himself to that effect, saying that “dharma and science are not in contradiction”.<sup>3</sup> This also happens to be the view held by His Holiness the Dalai Lama. If science—that is, empirical evidence—shows to be in discord with

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<sup>3</sup> I actually have never heard Rinpoche say something to that effect, but I have no reason to doubt Mr. Trisoglio, and it makes sense, carefully considering the context.

sacred Buddhist texts, such texts need amendment, pure and simple.

I raised a significant distinction. I pointed that it is *only* in its *ideal form*, that is, when it actually follows Popperian falsifiability<sup>4</sup>—when it is totally free from foundational speculation—, that science is truly compatible with dharma. Both me and Mr. Trisoglio (and I believe Khyentse Rinpoche and the Dalai Lama) don't believe science by itself *leads* to the path of dharma and complete liberation, but we all agree science in this strict technical and practical sense of “latest falsifiable result that still stands” is totally in accord with Buddhist relative *pramana*, knowledge. The fact that wishful thinking over an ideal of science exists, and thus it becomes an arm-chair enterprise in its own way, is a matter of debate. Nonetheless, all Buddhists should accept this purely empirical idea of science, and its results, as some sort of boosted conventional common-sense, a very smart cowherd of sorts, but still a non-speculative, non-metaphysical or non-foundationalist cowherd. As someone going about the business of *functionally*, and always limitedly explaining things—not fully analyzing them from the point of view of ultimate reality<sup>5</sup>, or emptiness.

From the point of view of ultimate reality, science and the empirical knowledge of relatives mean nothing, but when correctly or completely understood, they are also *not obstacles* for this

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<sup>4</sup> This is the idea that science has no final views, but its views are those who stand up to refutation. In this sense, scientific truths need to be able, in principle, of being refuted. Metaphysical or foundational truths, on the other hand, are those things which supposedly *can't be proven false*. Science is a truth that stands, but that for which we understand there is a potential of refuting them in the future.

<sup>5</sup> Even though the Sanskrit and Tibetan for the two levels of epistemology or didactics is normally translated as “two truths” (ultimate or absolute and relative), I tried to preserve a certain western analytical perspective that clearly distinguishes epistemology from logic and ontology, and also propositions from referents. In this way, absolute or ultimate truth is rendered “ultimate reality”, even though it could be called simply “reality”, and relative truth is rendered “relative existence”, even though it could be called simply “appearance”.

recognition. As such, they can be accepted as relative knowledge.

Mr. Trisoglio has actually informed us that Rinpoche's own views on science changed over time. Being exposed to scientific-minded people assured him of the existence of the notion of Popperian falsifiability, which then made it clear that science and Buddhist logic and epistemology (*pramana*) were compatible (of course, in the relative sense). If we have certain foundationalist or final notions of knowledge, as if things could be ultimately explained through a formula—or words of any kind—then I believe Buddhism (and Gödel, and Wittgenstein, etc.) would have to raise objections.

On the other hand, when more pressing matters such as rebirth and certain issues in philosophy of mind were raised, Mr. Trisoglio seemed to indicate that the present understanding of certain science as, frankly, *denying* consciousness, should or could be accepted in a middle-way argumentation of relative existence. This really disturbed me, to the point that I came to believe Mr. Trisoglio could only be defending such absurdities due to some mischievous command from his mercurial teacher, Khyentse Rinpoche. Yes, I thought he was accepting the low position of being wrong and behaving like a troll in order to raise attention to this issue, or for any assorted Tilopa-allows-Naropa-to-be-beaten sort of reason, for that matter. (Rinpoche is known to ask his students for the craziest things, his omniscience alone understanding the peculiarity of the requests.)

## The “hard problem”

We had, also, it is true, a few miscommunications.

At first he believed I was defending some sort of dualism—that is, that I would be propounding some sort of substantial consciousness. He actually

accused<sup>6</sup> the known Buddhist scholar Alan Wallace of this same fault, which amounts to classify him into the *cittamatra* arena, a school defeated by Chandrakirti and all other middle-way proponents. Prof. Wallace is a Dzogchen teacher and fine scholar of Tibetan. He is certainly well aware of Chandrakirti's refutation of *cittamatra*, and surely, like all Tibetan Buddhist teachers, considers himself a middle-way proponent and practitioner. He might, as all humans, be prone to error, but that surely doesn't seem a very charitable reading of a contemporary of close lineage.

All this happened even though I raised my "updated" version of the *catuskoti*<sup>7</sup>, claiming that our argument should be beyond one substance, two substances, multiple substances and no substance<sup>8</sup>.

Also, he still even claimed physicalists such as Daniel Dennett as "nondualists", where it is very much clear, by their own definitions, that they are *monists*. We latter agreed that monism was or could be a form of reification, while non-duality would be free from extremes. But in our conversations Mr. Trisoglio still claimed Dennett, a physicalist, is a nondualist. This confusion arises between the language used in the area of philosophy of mind and dharma. Nondualism in philosophy of mind means *only* that there is no dualism of mind and matter,<sup>9</sup> which mostly accounts either for a single

material substance<sup>10</sup> or a spiritual substance only (idealism)—while in middle-way dharma nondualism is a "nontology", in which the very concept of substance is taken as self-contradictory.<sup>11</sup>

In fact, the Buddha's own position on this philosophy of mind question, the "Hard Problem", as some put it, was not either the dualist or the monist position. He clearly stated in the Pali Suttas<sup>12</sup> that he could not affirm body and mind are the same *or* that they are different. This is in total agreement that the very idea of substance is self-contradictory, and that *both* the monist and dualist positions are extremes. Yet, it seems some Buddhists still confuse plain run-of-the-mill reified monism with non-duality beyond extremes.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> I think this might be a Daniel Dennett accusation of Prof. Wallace that Mr. Trisoglio agreed to. "Dualism" for Dennett, as explained next in the text, has here a purely philosophy of mind connotation, should not be confused with a more general ontological dualism.

<sup>7</sup> This is middle-way logic staple, since the extremes are described as negation, affirmation, both and neither. In fact, this goes through combinations to form 16 extremes, and etc. It is not this, it is not that, it is not both, it is not either.

<sup>8</sup> Monism, dualism, pluralism and nihilism. Affirming one, negating one and affirming a definite number, negating a definite number and affirming an indefinite number, and negating any.

<sup>9</sup> Even ontologically, we might be able to identify other dualisms, and also, there's epistemological dualisms—and things such as realism, which is a dualist position between ontology and epistemology themselves.

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<sup>10</sup> Nature, *physis*, thus "physicalism" or "naturalism". Sometimes also "materialism" is a synonym. It all depends on the nature and properties of this "one substance". Current belief goes around some group of universal (taken for granted) rules, either locality (no "spooky action" at distance) or realism (even though there are some believers who still take both as possible at the same time, even though it is proven otherwise), some degree of determinism up to superdeterminism, and some type of hope towards math or symmetry. It is quite a "complex substance", with no clear boundaries or definitions, but anyway postulated.

<sup>11</sup> The *Lankavatara Sutra* expresses emptiness as "Things are not what they appear to be, nor are they anything else". The philosopher reads an excluded middle violation of sorts, and even a contradiction—since things "are not what they are, and not even the opposite"—but this is the said "nontology", appearances are not negated, but they are not reality. It only seems paradoxical because we want to infiltrate some sort of substance or metaphysical structure that would seem to give us a base of sorts "to work with". But if we do so, it is foundationalist, circular and in particular is done just to save language's (and logic's, and the philosopher's) face(s)—not to really rest in the recognition of true nature, nonconceptual freedom from extremes.

<sup>12</sup> *Cula-Malunkhyovada Sutta*, the differences between *jiva*, *atman* and *citta* will soon be dealt with in this text.

<sup>13</sup> To be fair with Mr. Trisoglio, he now admits there are two varieties of monism, one compatible with middle-way, the other not. How any notion of substance, or metaphysical foundationalist thing could be compatible with the middle-way, I am yet to be convinced.

## Sweeping scientism<sup>14</sup> under the rug

Another author Mr. Trisoglio elevates as somewhat a middle-way nondualist is Thomas Metzinger, a crypto-physicalist with nuances of Krishnamurtian nihilism and fascist undertones. I and many of my dharma friends who were watching Mr. Trisoglios course were eagerly waiting for some kind of refutation of the *charvakas*<sup>15</sup> Metzinger and Dennett (physicalists who deny consciousness), by our hero teacher, but it never came to be.

One of the most despicable aspects of Metzinger's theories is the negation of scientism, and the proposition that some sort of "folk science" would be the real problem. Surely, in many cases scientism is a result of folk notions of science, since detailed rigorous epistemology requires formal study and practice. We can all agree scientism exists within this sphere, that of unlearned *believers* in science. Here we have from quantum mysticism to the notion that The Big Bang Theory is supposed to explain something about the *origins* of the universe (and not something about how the present observable universe came to be configured like it is now, a huge difference that you won't find clearly stated almost anywhere)—those are both views common in folk science and scientism, both come from distortions of science mixed with some religious yearning for meaning through science (which is

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<sup>14</sup> Scientism is an ideological distortion of science, in that it expects from science either final explanations, explanations about origins, determinations on underlying substances, "meaning of it all", complete theories or final formulations, and so on.

<sup>15</sup> Charvaka is a non-Vedic Indian materialistic school refuted by Hindu, Jain and Buddhists. They hold similarities with physicalists, negating rebirth, but also differences, having no proper epistemology accounting for causality (science) and also no ethical theory—which seems to be possible in a secular fashion according to His Holiness the Dalai Lama and both physicalist authors mentioned by Mr. Trisoglio (Dennett and Metzinger).

what we *define* as *scientism*: science as a placeholder for metaphysical beliefs). Yet, folk science and scientism is not the same thing.

Scientism is also common among scientists, and is an *educated* projection of foundationalism in science—of which Metzinger and Dennett are very much in fault on their own.

This is exactly where we disagree, I on one side and Metzinger and Mr. Trisoglio on the other: on the presence of scientism *within* science as it is actually practiced today. Of course, Mr. Trisoglio agrees scientists are not enlightened beings, that they have biases, and mostly have no glimpse of selflessness, or the remote possibility of what we call *path* in Buddhism—of course, those things depend, according to Buddhists, on merit<sup>16</sup>, not forceful thinking or systematic experimentation and peer review. Yet, Mr. Trisoglio seems to be quite sure scientists don't *conceptually* reify nature, and that they don't normally hold metaphysical or ideological notions *as science*. This would be the difference between some ideal of science we all agree makes us smarter cowherds, and science as it exists and is practiced in the world today, where it sometimes creates obstacles for dharma, both personally and as a matter of public discourse.

Scientism both appropriates itself of traditional practices, such as in the mindfulness phenomenon, and seeming discredit "religious" ideas such as rebirth, for which doesn't really exist refutation apart from "well, it doesn't seem to be the case; we still haven't found no evidence of nothing like that"—but *that* is, through scientism, taken as a *result*.

When I pressed Mr. Trisoglio on this, he in passing mentioned Quantum Field Theory as some sort of haven in science where's there would be no reification of relative existents. Buddhists believe we, ignorant beings, have a tendency to

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<sup>16</sup> How merit and naturalism could coexist is difficult to answer. But I bet some patched plugin to the monist substance can be engineered given time enough.

absolutize, so when we use words such as chairs and atoms, mostly we do believe particular things exist that correspond to such concepts. Such things are hypostasized as if “by themselves”, in some sort of independent state. What we practice when we talk about emptiness is not negating such things as appearances, but the tendency to reify them. Objects such as space, time, causality, mathematics and physical laws are very prone to be strongly established as the most real things there are—but we also normally reify, as cowherds, less abstract things, such as our bodies and ordinary human-sized objects, situations and narratives.

This is where a “very smart cowherd” might be deceiving himself as some sort of bias free non-religious person, while he takes all those second-level abstract concepts and deeply reify them. Even when physicists talk about *models*, most of them keep a profound realist stance: that is, they believe in an ulterior, perfect model, to be strived for. That won’t work for a true middle-way skeptic. That is still “too religious”, from the Buddhist point of view.

Also, many scientists do believe science can provide final explanations and even something like “meaning”. In fact, if you press most scientists, they would be offended by the idea of science as pure instrumentalism, pure calculation without explanation. Yet, that seems to be the cowherd way of doing science, even though this kind of functionalist explanations make science more like engineering than knowledge—because knowledge, in most of our common connotations, implies foundationalist knowledge, which is a problem for middle-way.

Personally, I don’t think any quantum physics epistemology hits the core of middle-way understanding; even if some of them do actually come close (there are so many concurrent contradictory interpretations!) Quantum Field Theory by itself is now seen as some sort of instrument for calculations, since it doesn’t explain all we need to explain, and the craving for a more *fundamental* theory is clearly widespread since at least the 80’s. If emptiness didn’t explain things in

their ultimate sense<sup>17</sup>, or if we were seeking a more fundamental explanation, I believe us as Buddhists, wouldn’t care so much about Buddhism anymore. This is not quite cowherd at all, this is a religious, “philosophical disease” yearning, very common in science.

But let’s agree, for the sake of argument, that certain physic theories can go beyond the reification of nature, laws, space, time, forces, mass, particles, fields, etc. Does the physicalist theories of people such as Dennett and Metzinger subscribe to this fringe view of supposed unreified nature within science? I think we can safely assume all that scientists normally do is to reify nature—even though they don’t *need* to do it, in order to do good science, on the contrary. As it stands, on the other hand, scientists are as far as they can be from nondualism and the middle-way. Yet, the perfect scientist *could* be a non-speculative non-metaphysical cowherder. Only this seems to be very rare: scientism is the prevailing view.

## Two levels of confusion

My main argument against the physicalists here, bear with me, is a Buddhist argument. It doesn’t mean it doesn’t hold, but it is a way to explain in what way physicalism is *incompatible with the middle-way*. For the refutation of metaphysics in general, including naturalism, one should go directly to middle-way teachings. But, as far as we will go here, someone like Mr. Trisoglio, who takes seriously his experience as a meditator, should believe in consciousness as a *relative* existent. In fact, all cowherd people who wake up in the morning after some delightful dream should be crazy of negating their internal experience. Consciousness is relatively existent because it exists within the experience of a cowherder.

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<sup>17</sup> Phrasing it more in the middle-way understanding: “freed ourselves from ultimate uncertainties”.

As a passing note, what exactly physicalist types such as Dennett do is to deny the *relative existence of consciousness*. It sometimes sounds good to Buddhist ears because they also deny the self, which is a Buddhist staple. But the middle-way is perfectly clear (and there's no qualms in all different interpretations of Mahayana middle-way about this), the self has no existence whatsoever—it is *only an empty designation* (a *mere imputation*), with no referent anywhere. It is pure convention, no existence at all, in any mode.

On the other hand, even though middle-way denies ultimate existence for things such as the body, the world, physical laws, and etc. it does assert their relative existence, or to be more precise, it accepts this assertion as valid within dual perception (it doesn't quite need to *assert* even this, but doesn't deny relative existence).<sup>18</sup> Yet, we can have knowledge, *pramana*, in this relative sense—as when we know this non-ultimate semaphore light, if wrong, can make for a non-ultimate very bad accident. This type of knowledge is very important for cowherders and aspiring cowherders.

For a middle-way proponent to equate in some way Dennet's (and most physicalist's) monism with nondualism, and equate this nondualism as a two realities (relative/absolute) system is completely preposterous. They totally assert true existence of physical properties (let's not fall into quantum shenanigans scapegoats), this is their absolute reality. Their *illusion* is consciousness and the self (sometimes also agency).

I made this point quite clearly to Mr. Trisoglio, I think at least with four different wordings. I will walk again through it here.

If the two levels of understanding (reality/illusion) in the physicalist view are comparable to middle-way, then physicalists assert the self and consciousness in the same way we assert the body, the world, physical laws and

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<sup>18</sup> How much or in what way things may be asserted is one of those points of contention in Buddhist polemics.

consciousness. That is, they assert the self as relatively existent.

If the two levels are different, then their absolute view what we take as relative. In this case, they deny the relative existence of consciousness, which they somewhat equate with the self.

Thus, they either throw away the bath-water with the child, or they assert the self. Since they claim not to assert the self, it is more the first scenario. This is also what Mr. Trisoglio seemed to lean to. Notwithstanding, like a properly functioning semaphore light, the relative existence of consciousness is important for many secular reasons. It is also particularly important for dharma, since path is composed of mind training, and the cowherd needs to recognize he is a “mind-bearer” being in order for the notions of purification, merit accumulation, dispelling of habits, etc. to be possible.

So, mine might not be a cogent argument against physicalists in general, not Buddhist inclined, but it is quite a powerful statement as to the great disparity between our two systems, and for the clear notion that monism and nondualism<sup>19</sup> are very different. Someone interested in the middle-way should be more skeptic of how others would be denying ultimate assertions of existence. In this case it is quite clear physicalists take a metaphysical stance, obviously, that of *physicalist monism*. By the way, this is not science; this is philosophical speculation, and a foundationalism stance, by definition not-falsifiable. It is pure and simply *scientism*. In this stance, the absolute existent is nature, or the physical world. To deny that with some excuse around fringe interpretations of quantum mechanics is utterly unacceptable. Even though some physicists have come close to a middle-way understanding, in general science still

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<sup>19</sup> The two realities position is true only within the relative conventions, it is, in truth, a didactic device, and reality is beyond notions of singular, plural, dual or absence. Non-duality is not in opposition to duality.

holds to very fundamental metaphysical assumptions.

### Avoiding metaphysics: on being cowherd

One of the important reflections I personally got from Mr. Trisoglio course was on how the middle-way deals with convention, common sense, and consensus. Counterintuitively, ultimate truth is not that hard—in some sense, it is out of reach for the conceptual mind, and what the conceptual mind can grasp of it, may not be that hard as how to preserve relative and conventional *pramana*.

Chandrakirti clearly states that he is not trying to create problems for common people. A Buddhism which would damage family life and economy in the name of some absolute idea would amount to a fundamentalist, not very different from a theistic one. Even though monastic life and other lifestyles peculiar to the Buddhist path might seem outrageous for the conventions of people, Buddhism is not trying to make the world conform to some Buddhist truth or particular lifestyle. What is meaningful for a dharma practitioner might not be meaningful for the world in general, and there's nothing wrong with that.

Yet Chandrakirti does allow for the refutation of some worldly ideas. The way he puts it leaves very clear the ultimate non-violence of the middle-way. I paraphrase: “if perchance, while exposing the truth, some common sense ideas get damaged, that is not my intention”. He has no intention of refutation or even transformation, but sometimes common sense gets trampled down. In fact, this is not very different from progress in science: the theories of the past are not replaced with any hard feeling; it is just that better ones show up.

The main problem for the middle-way practitioner is metaphysics. This word gets abused as “something spiritual”, but its meaning is foundational or structural knowledge of a *truly existent reality*, a reified reality. Thus, metaphysical

ideas are a type of second-level reification, beyond cowherd common sense. We have a strong habit of wrongly perceiving a self to exist, the metaphysical issue or second-level reification would be to create some sort of underlying entity with certain properties, in order to explain that perception of self. Thus we have notions of atman or soul. Our strong habits are problematic enough, but on top of them we speculate and create abstractions that further solidify our wrong perception.

We do that with things such as space, time, causality, essence, and so on—nature, for short. When we have an inclination to believe the laws and mathematical formulations we have in science are some sort of intrinsic feature of things, and not always imperfect models, with no supervening ultimate model to speak of.

So, what would be the cowherd? The cowherd is the best candidate for the Buddhist path. He still needs merit, but if he practices dharma, he has fewer obstacles. The cowherd is the very practical person with little philosophy, with very little metaphysics. You tell them “meditate”, he goes and tries on meditating, he doesn't argue with you about the best way to do it, or what are the latest scientific results on how meditation is healthy, and so on. He follows the instructions and checks for himself.

The opposite of the cowherd is the philosopher, in a bad sense. They are lost in speculation and metaphysics, and not in contact with practicalities. This person needs to be convinced; he has little good will for practical experimentation.

### Is science truly free from metaphysics?

What about science? As I think I have shown science does have a cowherd ideal, even though it mostly also has some foundationalist hopes. In practice, among both scientists and lay people who love science, it has lots of hidden metaphysics. Realism and physicalism are widespread foundationalist beliefs scientists don't even come



to think of as not scientific. In fact, it took a few tries before Mr. Trisoglio understood that when I said science was riddled with metaphysics I meant *physicalism, naturalism, monism, realism*.

Most physicalists are against what they perceive to be metaphysics, some sort of spiritual thing. But the actual meaning of metaphysics, that only the middle-way truly refutes, is the opposite of emptiness, that is conceptual, second order, reification. We reify objects through the senses and common language, but after we do that, we formulate theories trying to explain why things really exist the way they exist. Metaphysical literature is totally absurd, has never worked, is totally insane—and most metaphysicians would agree it is quite a circular and paradoxical field. But they rarely doubt the habitual tendencies of reification, thus they try to come out with theories to explain our wrong habitual patterns.

It has a strong link with religion, particularly with theism, because, since Aristotle, problems of “being” have led to the paradigmatic case of being, that is, god. Also, issues of origin lead to god. When we come to knowledge, then we have theories about knowing “being”, which is god. And also, knowing him through his creation, or if we fancy some pantheism, through his manifestation. That’s the actual origin of science.

People like Galileo didn’t study nature due to simple curiosity. They did it because they wanted to know god through his creation, and to know his mind became to know the math present in rules and laws of nature. Even though physicalism might today be a barren view with no god in sight, it still carries this same yearning for this superior mind recognized in the knowing of the structures of the external world.

Buddhism has none of this. Genesis, baloney. Structure, rules, laws, math? Fine if you want to bake bread and sell it, but there’s no

idea—at first at least—in profundity through appearances.<sup>20</sup>

No, Buddhism puts mind first. There’s actually a very good reason for that, which is particularly relevant for many of the issues we face in the world today.

## Why all this matters

Buddhism itself, at some points in its development, tried to negate mind, to dire consequences.

The confusion starts with an extreme interpretation of the middle-way doctrine. When the middle way refutes the *cittamatra* (idealist, mind-only school), it shows *cittamatrins* are positing the continuity of mind as some underlying structure that needs to be ultimately real in order to work. Middle-way will have none of that, in the ultimate sense, yes, mind is non-existent.

In some sense, the same confusions that plague the comparison of the nondual view with physicalism arose in Buddhism. Self, mind, consciousness and soul were all equated, and equally denied. But then, when troubles arose, notions of those things as relatively existent became common. The scope of negation has become either too vast or too narrow—particularly when we talk about relative existence.

To be precise, *self*<sup>21</sup> is the notion of an independent individual, the thing we postulate about ourselves and that we are most attached to almost all our lives. *Soul*<sup>22</sup> is the metaphysician second-order justification for that first-order deception. According to the middle-way, self is

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<sup>20</sup> That notion is actually present in Buddhism, but only in tantra, and it is very different than a metaphysical approach, requiring the nontology of emptiness taught in the sutrayana, to begin with.

<sup>21</sup> Atman.

<sup>22</sup> *Jiva*, also life, animation.

non-existent in both the absolute and relative senses. It doesn't exist at all. Unlike bodies, light, birds, and computer screens—those don't exist ultimately, but do exist relatively. Self is a simple convention, with no referent—no object, concrete or abstract, belongs under this concept's intention. When applied to some object, such as the body or our immediate conscious experience, since it has no true entity that corresponds to it, it becomes *invalid convention*, such as defective semaphore. Soul is the same: doesn't exist in any mode, and is also conventionally wrong. The difference is only on the level of ignorance. Belief in self is a more general, pervasive, condition; belief in soul is a more specific second layer conceptual resistance to the truth.

Consciousness is the recognition of an object in the space of mind. Mind is this capacity for recognition, for cognizance. Mind is also the collection of animated sequences of objects recognized by different levels of consciousness, such as thoughts, ruminations, emotions, and so on. Both of those things, even though they can't be ultimately established, are as relatively existent, exactly as a cat, a semaphore and a rock. When we say that, what we mean is that cowherds can (and should) deny the self that is their habitual perception, because if they think it through, they know it to be just a name pointing to no cohesive or integrated, self-contained thing. To point that imputation at anything is a defective semaphore, it will create big problems: a lot of suffering. On the other hand, cowherds can't (and shouldn't) deny their first person experience—it is, like it is described, empirical. This is relative, like a properly working semaphore doing its job. It is not the self, it is relatively existent.

Only philosophers, those second order deceivers, can deny their present experience in favor of some supposed logic, or a chain of words. Dennett and Metzinger do that, as in fact, some Buddhist extremists have done in the past.

When such extremes were taken seriously by Buddhists, situations arose in which fascistic governments utilized Buddhist training in order to

depersonalize the very act of killing. Since both you yourself and other people were no much more than a rock, you could use your Buddhist training in mental stability to be a kamikaze. You are only moving the sword through space, with a body in the way. You remain in “the present” while the rocket hits the ground killing you and others. This is the “Zen Doctrine of No-mind”, which is actually more related to German romanticism than to Buddhist teaching.<sup>23</sup>

These days, our deeply materialistic society works within that very nihilistic framework. This is for both good for war and business. The Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek has actually accused Buddhism of being the perfect doctrine for our virtual markets, and extreme forms of capitalism—where you play with some numbers, like a gambler, not in touch with the human and environmental consequences of your actions. But what is Žižek's source for Buddhist ideas? The Christian German-philosophy influenced D. T. Suzuki, discarded as bogus by all Buddhists. He has a very well-known book called “The Zen Doctrine of No-Mind”, and does perpetuate the sort of extremist views similar to the prevalent physicalism. No wonder Žižek thinks Buddhism is the best religion for the capitalist predator—only that what he describes as Buddhism are the musings of a Christian Japanese trained in German philosophy—it is not Buddhism at all.

So, in a sense, it is true. The hegemonic view in our world today is the metaphysical physicalist monism of sheer scientism, the metaphysical extreme of a style of monism. Its nihilism pervades the world destroyer consumer culture, and economically distorts science itself, like in the shenanigans of psychiatric diagnosis designed by the pharmaceutical industry; all the while doubt about agency (also discredited by physicalism) and

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<sup>23</sup> Of course Zen is a genuine teaching; this is just a common historic distortion in Zen, a Zen disease, as there are similar ones in other Buddhist traditions, distorting their teachings into particular flavors.

pervasive nihilism contribute for the mental health epidemics.

In short, negating consciousness has and personal agency is very deleterious for the world, the human species and also for individuals. It is not at all the same as negating the self, which has benefits for all these levels. It is like confusing altruism with depersonalization: one is a feature of mental health, is a feature of Buddha nature, the other is just mental disease.

I don't think Mr. Trisoglio himself commits such a mistake, but he does allow for the physicalist view on the cowherd side of things, not recognizing it is metaphysics, and it has a direct deleterious action over both cowherd common sense and the dharma path.

## Modern cowherds and rebirth

Rebirth is a complex issue in Buddhism. In the ultimate sense, true, rebirth makes no sense. But also cars, cats and medicine, everything else, make no sense in the ultimate. So the ultimate is not a part of the justification or *pramana* for the relative.

Yet, in the relative sense, rebirth is also complex. It is not like most of us have the direct experience of it—unless, of course, taken to the extreme, the illusion of continuity we experience day to day is called “rebirth” (which makes some sense, actually). But, if we take cowherders, unless they are born in India or somewhere where this belief is prevalent, they don't have any good reason to accept it. Apart from cultural conventions, rebirth (after death) is not a common sense idea, or direct experience, for no one.<sup>24</sup>

Yet, for the Buddhist *path*, rebirth is a requirement. It is impossible to understand, even

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<sup>24</sup> Well, one can always point to anecdotal evidence that support that the idea exist—but everyone knows about the idea, and fake memories are very easily acquired. Such testimonials don't actually make the case here.

superficially, something like the Four Noble Truths without the notion of rebirth or some kind of life after death. If everything ends, if suffering ends in death, then there's simply no reason to practice. In fact even simple ethics become difficult to justify, in the broader view of dharma. (Secular ethics might be possible, but they do seem always to require one or other foundationalist ideas, which by themselves might hinder the path of dharma).

Since Buddhism is adapting to cultures where rebirth is not a cowherd cultural staple, there's this big issue, and there are modern Buddhist attempts to secularize Buddhism, and get rid of such “cultural ideas”.

Yet, here Buddhism itself is at stake. Rebirth is not common sense, it is a cultural artifact, but it is also essential for dharma path. How to deal with that?

First, people need to be remembered rebirth is not metaphysics. Rebirth is mainly a perspective on the relative. It is not *directly* empirical<sup>25</sup>, but so aren't atoms. We need tools, laboratory, settings, models, education, and then we can “sort of” examine atoms with say, an electron microscope. In the same way, Buddhist claim that if you practice enough *shamata*, you will directly (empirically) access this knowledge. Although most of us don't know how to operate a complex microscope, we believe the images scientists generate, even though they are based on theories and models, and could be artificially designed with any common computer graphics software. But we do tend to get skeptical of first person testimonials, such as the ones provided by Buddha Shakyamuni himself, or great dharma teachers throughout history.

But how does a commonsensical aspiring cowherder approach this? Should we just buy Indian cultural staples, in order for Buddhism to

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<sup>25</sup> The issue of mediation in empiricism is notably hard.

be possible for us? Well, if we have such merit, ok, but if we don't, we should be very careful not to be led off by physicalism. If the belief in rebirth is too difficult, perhaps it is that we believe in truly existing nature (*physis*, matter)? If we deny metaphysics, and thus physicalism, we don't deny consciousness; we are naturally open to work with the views of dharma, even if we don't believe them. Perhaps we should work with them without much belief; anyway, because belief seems to have a connotation of "true existence", and we know, in the ultimate sense, all of this is useless.

On the relative sense, we should check how useful it is to consider that every being has been our mother zillions of times through countless lifetimes. For me it seems pretty useful.

Also, Mr. Trisoglio is not a denier in rebirth. Perhaps he was trying to find a way to make rebirth compatible with the modern perspective immersed in scientism? But got lost believing in (or being too lenient with) the metaphysics of physicalism? Or he was just trying to find out people out there who have a view similar to Stephen Batchelor<sup>26</sup> in order to refute them? Sort of like a bait? We might never know.

## Buddhists who wag their tails at science

Even though Khyentse Rinpoche said we should accept science, he also expressed distaste for "Buddhists who wag their tails at scientists".<sup>27</sup> I think here he meant the sort of unexamined credence we are used to give to people in labcoats.

In particular, Buddhism is currently in the process of being appropriated by science. Buddhist methods are being bastardized and used to make people "destroy the world better", that is, refining

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<sup>26</sup> A Buddhist denier of rebirth, which Khyentse Rinpoche has often criticized for that reason.

<sup>27</sup> Teachings on *Transcending Madness* at Halifax, Nova Scotia, November 2008.

attention for snipers, or training in cold blood for executives and financial speculators.

This doesn't need to go like that, but the view of Buddhism as a "religious" doctrine comes from the physicalist prejudice against, in particular, rebirth. But if only the focus on consciousness as relatively existent is recovered, we can deal better with agency, ethics and the Buddhist path. We can retain certain openness to rebirth<sup>28</sup>, which might make the Buddhist path workable.

Either way, when Buddhists go to either the extremes of denying science, wearing tin-foil hats and the like, or embracing it without proper examination, we surely have a problem.

Science itself could really benefit from the root of impartiality in dharma, which is the meditative equipoise. This could make science less prone to metaphysical speculation of the physicalist kind, or any kind for that matter. Also, it doesn't need to be appropriation. If science recognizes its own metaphysical tendencies, Buddhism can embrace it properly as *pramana*, and this science, freed from its religious mumbo-jumbo, is surely blessed by the Buddhas. We don't need to hold prejudice against it.

Perhaps Mr. Trisoglio in this course was pandering for the modern mindset, populistically partial to the prevailing scientism in our culture. But I prefer to think he was either working those

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<sup>28</sup> "Absence of evidence doesn't mean evidence of absence." The main reasoning behind physicalism is circular: since we have no evidence of anything else but what we are used to observe, what we are used to observe must be the only really existing thing. This substance, with these complex features—features that change from time to time, as new theories emerge—is what we affirm as really existent. Of course, no one is saying that there is a substance, yet it is obvious the naturalistic view is unfalsifiable, and it is by itself metaphysics, not science. It is metaphysics, and Buddhists, in the ultimate sense, refute any "really existing thing". In the conventional sense, whatever works is fine. If you need path, then, whatever works for path—which includes rebirth, which by the way has not been proved impossible or non-existent: it is only unfashionable due to present metaphysical (naturalist) prejudices within science.

things for himself together with us, or that he is actually a guru mandated trickster.

In any way, Buddhist dharma seems totally compatible with falsifiability and scientific empiricism. It is not, though, compatible with any underlying metaphysics that real-life science believers and practitioners many times hold, such as naturalism.

Either way, his course was very important and informative to me, and I recommend it without reservations, considering the points I raised above. I rejoice in our merit and dedicate it.



this text may be found at

<https://tza.org/a-review-of-the-madhyamaka-course-by-alex-trisoglio/>