

The Open Door to Emptiness by Khenchen Thrangu, Rinpoche
Based on a part of Mipham Rinpoche's *Gateway to Knowledge*
(Excerpt: Beginning of Chapter 1)

Chapter 1
*An Introduction to
The Open Door to Emptiness*

In approaching the subject of *Madhyamaka*, (Tib. *Uma*) we must first determine what this subject is. The word *uma* means "the middle." It is called "the middle" because it avoids extremes, in this case, meaning the extreme notions of being and nothingness.

The actual meaning of *Madhyamaka* is this direct, straightforward view which does not fall into any extremes, a view which is at first very difficult to attain. Because we do not initially have this view, the commentary on *Madhyamaka*, or the Middle Way, is taught. The instructions on the right view were first taught by *Sakyamuni Buddha* and were later commented upon by various enlightened teachers. The treatises of these commentators are referred to as "the shastras on *Madhyamaka*." This discussion will concern the commentaries on *Madhyamaka*. The teaching is given so that students may come to understand the fundamental nature of reality, enter the practice path to realization, and attain freedom from suffering.

The Buddha *Sakyamuni* presented the Middle-way view many times in different ways and all of these can be subsumed in the three turnings of the *wheel of dharma*. The Buddha first taught in Sarnath in India, shortly after his enlightenment, to a number of beings who had neither great energy nor expansive minds. He taught them the *four noble truths*. He taught that all ordinary existence is suffering, that this suffering results from our own karma, and that this karma is created through the defiled nature of our own mind.

Defiled mind, he said, comes from our own clinging to a notion of individual self or *ego*. Thus the Buddha showed suffering is the nature of existence in the world and the source of this suffering. Then he showed that it was possible for us to free ourselves from this suffering by attaining *nirvana*.

In order to attain *nirvana* it is not enough to have a moral inclination or a feeling that one might attain it; one must practice the path diligently to reach the complete cessation of suffering and the defilements which is *nirvana*. In this context, "the path" means counteracting the clinging to a notion of ego or self. By doing so, we can be freed from the defilements of our mind, freed from the necessity of creating karma, and thus be released from the necessity of continued rebirth in the world.

In the first turning of the wheel of dharma, the Buddha did not specifically teach emptiness, though he did indirectly suggest it. The lack of ego that he taught in this turning was not the lack of self in an ultimate sense, but in the simpler sense that there is no permanent, solid individual ego or self-nature.

Later, in Rajgir in Northern India, the Sakyamuni Buddha taught the second turning of the wheel of dharma: the teachings on the lack of fundamental characteristics. He taught the *sixteen modes of emptiness*: outer appearances are empty; the inner world of thoughts is empty; both outer and inner things taken together are empty, and so on. In doing so he demonstrated that not only in the ordinary sense is there no ego, but no inherent reality can ever be found in anything, no matter where we look.

Later still, in Sravasti, Sakyamuni taught the third turning of the wheel of dharma, in which he revealed that emptiness is not merely empty, but gives rise to all phenomena and is continually expressive. This third turning included teachings on *Buddha-nature* (Skt. *tatagatagarbha*), the basic teaching on which the philosophy of the *Cittamatra* or the Mind-only school, was founded.

The distinction between the second and third turning is that, in the teachings at Rajgir, the Buddha taught emptiness as being a function of appearance, that is, the highest quality of appearance—its lack of true existence. Whereas in Sravasti he taught emptiness as a foundation upon which everything is based.

This is how the Buddha taught the correct view to sentient beings.