

Chittamatra

Texts used in Chittamatra

The mahayana tradition divides all the teachings of the Buddha into 3 'turnings of the wheel of dharma'

The discourses on the first turning suggest that phenomena exist from their own side. These take a pragmatic approach, focusing on the suffering that we all live with and how to reduce and eliminate it.

The Buddha's discourses on the second turning strongly assert that phenomena have no intrinsic nature; as a result, there is a seeming contradiction from the teachings on the first turning.

The sutras on the third turning address this contradiction. The specific sutras used by the Chittamatra school are considered to be part of the 3rd turning of the wheel.

The 3 main sutras they use are:

1. Buddha Nature Sutra - Tathaghatagarba Sutra
2. Sutra Unraveling the Thought - Samdhinirmochana Sutra
3. Descent into Lanka Sutra - Lankavatara Sutra

Chittamatra's Base, Path, and Result

This school has 2 names:

1. Chittamatra - Mind Only School because the school rejects the existence of reality of objects beyond the mind that knows them.
2. Yogachara - Practice of Yoga - because the masters of this school justified their reasoning by referring to the insights they had gained in meditation.

Asanga is traditionally considered to be its founder. The ideas existed before him, but he brought them together systematically. According to the tibetan tradition he did not hold chittamatra views, but he most clearly showed the unique features of this schools philosophy.

The 2 lower schools talked about existent particles and such... They paint the picture of real objects apprehended by perception, in which the objects are external to an separate from the perceiving consciousness. Objects and consciousness are 2 different entities, and there is a causal relationship between them, the object being the cause of the consciousness, and the consciousness being the result.

The Chittamtra school refutes the existence of external objects. That doesn't mean they reject

the existence of tables, chairs, and such. This school rejects the existence of external things that are *independent* of consciousness. The mind exists as an intrinsic truly existent reality, but external objects have no such intrinsic truly existing reality because they exist as objects of our known universe only in relation to the mind observing them.

For Chittamatrans, external phenomena and the mind perceiving them are not 2 entirely separate entities; instead they are 2 aspects of the same entity.

The object arises in dependence on the consciousness apprehending it, and the consciousness apprehending the object arises in dependence on the object. Because they are not 2 entities but on, there is causal sequential relationship.

This school is unique in that it asserts that all existent things are divided into three natures: dependent, perfect, and imputed -- all three of which are aspects of any single phenomena

It is also unique in regard to how many consciousness it asserts. All the other schools place the number of consciousness at 6.-- 5 sense and one mental. **This school adds 2 more: the mind-basis-of-all and the afflictive mental consciousness, asserting that these must exist for karma to operate.**

They assert 2 types of selflessness or emptiness:

1. selflessness of persons - almost identical to the previous schools
2. selflessness of phenomena - regarded as phenomena's perfect nature - the final mode of existence of an object, which in this school is the non duality of subject and object.

In addition to the 37 aspects of the path to enlightenment, the Chittamatra school emphasizes Bodhicitta and the 6 perfections.

They also assert full enlightenment, not just liberation as the result of the path. In full enlightenment, the practitioner attains the 2 bodies of a buddha, the form body and the truth body... rupakaya and dharmakaya... thus accomplishing the purposes of both self and others. The truth body is often further divided into 2: wisdom truth body(jnanakaya) and the natural truth body(svabhavikakaya); the form body is also further divided into 2: the enjoyment body(sambhogakaya) and the emanation body(nirmanakaya).

The Three Natures

They assert that all phenomena have three natures:

1. the dependent nature
2. the imputed nature
3. the perfect nature

Dependent Nature

or 'other powered' -- an object that is the result of causes and conditions.

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Every moment of mind is laden with karmic seeds. Some are ripening, while others are being created by our mental, verbal, and physical actions. Our whole universe is dictated by the creating and ripening of these seeds. The chittamatras calls this the **causal flow**, which is the base upon which all else operates.

The dependent nature is what arises in our consciousness from the causal flow due to causes and conditions, and is apprehended as two polarities the subject(mind) and the object(object apprehended by the mind). To us it seems like the eye consciousness is here in the head and the pen is over there. -- these are 2 distinct and very unrelated objects. To the chittamatras there is a very strong connection. **Our experience of the pen-- of the flow of the pen-- and the pen itself are actually the same entity.** There is no difference between these two.

The flow of consciousness, from which the subjective and objective aspects arise, is the dependent nature

Dependent natures include all impermanent phenomena. All the objects of the universe arise, abide, and disintegrate in conjunction with the consciousness that apprehend them and are one entity with them.

Imputed Nature

When we apprehend an object, its as if subject (our perception) and object (the object) are different entities, distinct and independent. This false distinction of subject and object is superimposed onto the object by the mind. So this is *imputed nature*. Furthermore, we almost always embroider our apprehension of the object in some way, by imputing properties and values onto it that it does not have. These 2 natures tie us to cyclic existence.

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The apparent distinction between subject and object is a mistaken view that only comes about because of the conceptual, habituated aspect of our mind.

The appearance of the mind and its object as two separate, unconnected things, is the imputed nature

Subject and object are one entity, but we impute separateness onto them.

Instead of seeing that the subject and object arise from the single flow of experience, we conceptualize different entities -- the object grasped by the mind and the mind that grasps the object. "Grasped" and 'grasper' are terms used by the chittamatra school.

Instinctively, we *assume* that objects exist separate from the mind, but any investigation of

objects necessarily involves mind in some way, so knowledge always has a subjective element. We know there is a pen, because we experience a pen. Thus, no object of knowledge exists apart from the mind experiencing it.

Be careful though, you may think it is saying that the object does not exist at all. This is not correct. This school is simply asserting that external objects cannot exist as an object in our universe without taking into account the mind experiencing them.

Therefore, although the mind truly exists, the objects of its experience -- that is, all the objects that comprise the universe-- cannot truly exist because they rely on the mind, coming into being as projections of our perception, not as separate entities.

If the mind is inextricably involved with external objects, then it must also be the case with mental object, including the all-important concept of "I". Nothing exists in our world that is not an experience of mind. Object and mind are one entity.

The dependent nature is the mind/object relationship, and the imputed nature is what we put on top of that perception.

From the raw experience of the object, we impute the subject/object separation, and then on top of that all the other elements arise: labeling, judging, internal verbalizing, and myriad other conceptual minds. **The Chittamatra scholars say that language is what acts most powerfully to construct the imputed nature.**

Chittamatra's further divide the imputed nature into two:

1. existent imputed nature - permanent phenomena such as unproduced space and abstractions -- things that are not products of causes and conditions.
2. non-existent imputed nature - the one we have been looking at -- subject and object as different entities, as well as seeing objects as established by their own character, and so on. They are also things that have no existence at all, conventionally or otherwise, such as much loved horns of the rabbit.

Perfect Nature

Only when we become highly realized can we see that no such subject-object duality actually exists; this non duality is the *perfect*, or thoroughly established, nature of the object.

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Perceiving a duality between the mode of existence of an object and the way the mind conceives the object will not break down until a person has realized a very advanced state of mind.

At present, the karmic baggage we carry includes countless lifetimes of conceiving objects as being independently and externally existent; as a result, when an object and a mind perceiving that object arise in the mind, we instinctively see them as two separate things.

When our mind becomes more subtle through meditation, the gap between reality and illusion narrows.. the veil that the mind throws of the object gets thinner.

Eventually our meditation will become complete direct perception, with no use of image generalities. If we are meditating on our body for ex. there will be no concepts of body as the object and mind as subject. "Body" and "mind meditation on body" will become one.

Through meditation, the sense of the object being 'out there' ceases; the object we are meditating on becomes a part of the mind itself, and we have thoroughly established the lack of duality between subject and object. Hence, the other name for this nature is *thoroughly established*

Emptiness for the chittamatra school is not the absence of essence that other schools ascribe, but the absence of subject-object duality.

So, what is the chittamatra position on the realization of the 2 kinds of selflessness -- persons and phenomena?

- selflessness of persons - same as Sautrantika -- there is no self-sufficient person in any way
- selflessness of phenomena

The Chittamatrins agree with other Mahayana schools that realizing selflessness of persons is sufficient for removing the obscurations to liberation, removing the obscurations to omniscience - to buddhahood -- requires the realization of the selflessness of phenomena as well.

The perfect nature is often defined in the texts as the aspect of a phenomenon observed in such a way that the observation purifies both obscurations. For them, unlike the Madhyamikas, this means realizing the absence of subject and object. **This is the emptiness that a Bodhisattva must realize to attain full enlightenment**

The Mind-Basis-For-All

The law of cause and effect, or karma is a fundamental assertion throughout the whole of Buddhism. No Buddhist disputes that every cause has an effect. We create the cause; we get the result.

So if everything is impermanent, the yesterday me would be different that today me. How can the karma of that other person ripen in me?

When an action is created a propensity is placed on the consciousness. The other schools just say its someone on the consciousness.

Chittamatrins asserted a 7th consciosness beyond the 6. They say that the consciousness where the karmic imprint is placed must be neutral.. so that means the 6 consciousness aren't suitable since they fluctuate between positive, negative, and neutral. And they are temporary and cease when this life ends. They even cease when we go unconscious in this life.

They say it is this 7th mind that carries the seeds that will ripen to reestablish the more normal minds once a meditator comes of a deep meditation.

That mind is the mind-basis-for-all.

It acts as a base where the karmic seeds are stored.

They also posit an 8th mind.. the **afflictive mental consciousness**.. this mind filters everything through the sense of a permanent "I".

The Features of Mind-Basis-Of-All

The Mind-basis-for-all is a consciousness, as such, it follows the definition of all consciousnesses in that it is non material and is clear and knowing, but it quite different from the other types of consciousnesses.

The first way to see the differences is to look at its 4 features:

1. **object** - everything that is apprehended by the other minds is also apprehended by the mind-basis-for-all.
2. **aspect** - Its *aspect* is how it apprehends an object. It apprehends but does not actually ascertain its object, so its called an inattentive or non-ascertaining cognition. Contact is made with the object, but whereas the other minds fully engage with their objects, this mind does not actually ascertain its object. Its as if the object brushes over it, leaving nothing but an impression. When we see a desirable object, the other minds ascertain it, perceiving it and conceptualizing it in various ways, whereas the flavor of that desire stays on the mind basis for all as a propensity. Propensity, imprint, seed are all the same thing. All the other minds ascertain the object but are incapable of retaining anything about it, whereas the sole function of this mind is to retain some sort of taste. Its like right now you are reading and there is noise outside.. your mind can hear it and apprehend it but it may not be ascertained. So this mind cognizes, but never ascertains its object.
3. **nature** - the mind is clear and knowing, but here knowing should not be taken as an overt understanding of the object; its more in the way of potential. The specific *nature*, is that it is neutral. Of the three: virtuous, non-virtuous, or neutral, the chittamatras say it must be neutral. Otherwise, as a base for karmic seeds, it would taint them with whatever bias it has.
4. **accompanying minds** - For a mind to apprehend and object, the 5 always present mental factors must be there: contact, discernment, feeling, intention, and attention. This mind must have all of these, but it is not accompanied by any of the others.

For a mind to be clear and knowing it must know 'something'. A mind must be a subject that knows an object. The eye consciousness apprehends form, not sound for ex. They say that everything that is apprehended by the other minds is also apprehended by the mind-basis-for-all.

Its *aspect* is how it apprehends an object. It apprehends but does not actually ascertain its object, so its called an inattentive or non-ascertaining cognition.

The Properties of Mind-Basis-Of-All

For a mind to be the base for the karmic propensities, there are certain properties it must possess. It must be:

1. **stable** - karmic seeds will stay on the mind stream until they ripen, whether that takes a moment or eon, so the mind that carries them must be stable. Lasting as long as the propensities last, which in effect means until we become enlightened and all karmic seeds have been extinguished. Other minds arise, and cease, but this mind cannot.
2. **neutral** - we discussed this; otherwise its bias would affect the seeds it carries. This is like someone who is negative who gives a beggar a coin, but spends the rest of the day regretting it.. that positive action is tainted by the overalls negative atmosphere in which it was created.
3. **a conditioned compounded phenomena** - if this mind were permanent, it would not be able to change or function and therefore would not be able to acquire new karmic propensities each time an action is performed. It must be impermanent, and hence a compounded phenomena. Only then will there be a causal interaction between the mind and the action that creates the propensity. This mind must be receptive to take on karmic seeds, and for that it needs to be a conditioned compounded phenomena.
4. **related to the propensities** - this mind must also be related to the propensities. It's not enough that the mind is a compounded phenomena, there must be a tie between the action and the mind. A propensity is created in relation to a specific mental or physical action, and it is not as if the propensity from the action simply drops into a big container. It absorbs imprints without partiality, but it is in a dynamic and integrated exchange with other consciousnesses.
5. **basis in its own right** - using the example of the miser who gave the beggar a coin. His miserliness is built up as a habitual tendency for a long time back. Habitual tendencies might be strong, but they are not solid or eternal, and they are not a base upon which all other minds arise. The mind-basis-for-all is different than this. It has not arisen due to the force of familiarity. It has been there as long as there base been mind, and will continue until enlightenment. It is a basis in its own right without relying on other minds to arise. This is the mind that survives at death when all other minds cease. They say that this mind will continue until the end of samsara. As long as there is samsaric mind, this mind endures.

Afflictive Mental Consciousness

The mind basis for all is a crucial concept for the chittamatra school when it comes to identifying the sense of self of "I". For the other schools there are 5 aggregates alone and the I is designated upon those aggregates. The chittamatrans reject this saying that if this were so,

then the I would not be able to continue from life to life since the aggregates upon which it is designated are absorbed at death. therefore the aggregates are not a suitable base for apprehending something as an "I".

For them, the mind-basis-for-all is the perfect candidate for where the I abides, since it goes from life to life.

Because this is a base mind that the other minds are unable to apprehend, the chittamatrins had to posit an eighth mind that, called the **afflictive mental consciousness**. This is what ascribes the sense of self on whatever action is done (and hence the cause of all afflictions).

What the chittamatrans say about the I is quite interesting. They say that although the mind might identify our body or our feeling with the sense of "I", this is in fact only temporary. This sense comes and goes and cannot stand as a substantial basis for the "I". They say that below that there underlies a sense of a permanent unitary self that underpins and motivates our whole world. Although buddhism reject the idea of a self, this fundamental driving force that is carried on the mind-basis-for-all comes close to it, although of course it is not a unitary, independent entity. We continue life after life and our karma continues to ripen life after life, because the mind basis for all is the mechanism that carries our sense of self.

The afflictive consciousness is this very sense of "I" that we carry around all the time.

This consciousness is the mind that firmly believes that the I really exists, and so this school seeds it as the source of all the internal egoistic dialogue.

The mind-basis-for-all, the afflictive consciousness continues until enlightenment, but gets weaker as we progress towards enlightenment. Its like a container of seeds.. as we burn off seeds of unenlightenment, the mind basis for all will still remain as a container until there are no more seeds left, then there will be no more container.

For the chittamatra perspective, this afflicted mind is the real cause of our problems. It is the white noise of I, I, I that bubbles away all the time. It is the screen that filters everything we experience the internal discursive conversation that forever runs through our life. This becomes especially clear when we try to meditate. Then we can really hear the ego-radio loud and clear.

How an object exists according to Chittamatra

You may think from the name 'mind only' that this school asserts that there is only mind, but this is not so. We should not make the mistake of thinking that this school's views are nihilistic.

If there is only mind, does that mean that all of the things that make up our world are merely mental constructions? The mind is clear and knowing, so does that mean the seat you are sitting on is clear and knowing?

The lower 2 schools assert that when the fundamental building blocks aggregate they form the objects of the world as we know it.. thus they posit a causal relationship that is not dependent on a mind perceiving it.

The chittamatras refute this saying that if such an independent external entity were to exist, then it would have to possess an intrinsic quality that would project its appearance to consciousness.

The existence of an independent external entity furthermore implies that whatever is perceived by consciousness must be objective -- it must actually be there in exactly the way the consciousness perceives it. According to the Chittamatras this is not the case.

Perception by definition is subjective, my perception of an object, such as this piece of paper is going to be different than what you perceive.

Perhaps they will be similar for people of similar cultures, but they will be different.

Therefore, the page that I perceive does not exist as I perceive it until it is encountered by my consciousness.

Chittamatra philosophers do not refute the existence of objects, they refute their external existence.

Other philosophies posit an external world that exists in and of itself and the mind as something that responds to it, the chittamatra school asserts that the mind and its objects arise simultaneously, from the same karmic cause.

In every second the whole world as we know it arises and ceases in its apparent duality of subjective and objective aspects, caused by propensities left on the mindstream by our previous actions

They say that the duality of subject and object arises only due to the impact of strong imprints from our countless previous lives association with ignorance. The notion of difference between subject and object is mere hallucination, and this misperception, this grasping at subject and object as separate entities, is the main root of cyclic existence. **In fact, the perceiving consciousness and object it perceives are the same entity.**

The concept of **same entity** is hard to grasp, and there is no clear explanation about it. As we saw in the other schools there the general idea about how an object is apprehended by a sense consciousness is one of cause and effect. There is an external object that is independent of the mind observing it, and is the cause of the apprehension. Cause and effect requires sequence, so first there is the computer (the cause), and then there is the eye consciousness perceiving the computer (the effect).

For this school, the eye consciousness apprehending the computer, and the computer itself arise simultaneously; there is no sequence. We store innumerable imprints on our consciousness, which they call *fundamentally stored*. As such, both the consciousness that experiences and the object that it relates to arise from the fundamentally stored imprints, and both are of the same substance.

These karmic imprints are activated by the coming together of various causes and

conditions, and when activated these karmic seeds turn into both the object experienced and the consciousness experiencing the object. Thus, subject and object are generated from the same source and have a single substantial cause -- that is, they are the same substance.

ex:

Imagine you are in a dark forest at night. I hear a cry and see a dark shape, its a wolf. I am immediately afraid. From the wolfs side, there is no wolf, and no danger. It doesn't think of itself as a wolf, or as a terrifying animal. All that is from my side. So the entity 'wolf' and the danger all arise simultaneously with the mind perceiving it. They are the same substance.

Ultimate Truth and Conventional Truth According to Chittamatra

The *Compendium of Ascertainments* states that ultimate truth has 5 characteristics

1. **inexpressible** - its impossible to verbally describe ultimate truth precisely
2. **non dual** - within the realization of an area being in meditative equipoise who is realizing ultimate truth directly, there is differentiation -- no duality -- of subject and object
3. **beyond apprehension by the conceptual mind** - the ultimate truth cannot be realized by ordinary peoples cognition but only by the direct perception of an area being
4. **beyond diversity** - the ultimate truth of an object is not one with its dependent nature, which has many 'diversities' - different factors such production, result, causes, conditions, and so on. For ex. when we establish the final mode of existence of form, the final mode of existence is the non duality of subject and object, so all diversities cease.
5. **all one taste** - tables, chairs, and so on are different objects, but their ultimate truth is the same. Their final mode of existence is also the mere absence of duality of subject and object. Thus, the ultimate truth of all phenomena are all of one taste.

Of the three natures, *perfect nature* is an ultimate truth. The other 2, dependent and imputed are conventional truths. They say perfect and dependent nature are truly existent and imputed nature is not.

So we can see that this school differentiate between

Things that truly exist - as ultimate truths (perfect nature) or conventional truths (dependent natures)

Things that don't truly exist - imputed natures and fictional conventional truths

Perfect nature is an ultimate truth because it is the only mode of existence of an object that

possesses these 5 characteristics. Its an ultimate truth because when a practitioner focuses on an objects perfect nature, delusions and ignorance are purified, and continued concentration on the perfect nature leads to the practitioner to the complete cessation of suffering. Focusing on the other 2 natures won't lead to complete cessation because they do not have these 5 characteristics.

1. **dependent nature** - truly existent -> conventional truth
2. **imputed nature** - conceptually constructed -> conventional truth
3. **perfect nature** - truly existent -> ultimate truth

In summary, according to the Chittamatra view, things referred to as external phenomena, such as car, fruit, mountains, etc are not separate entities independent of the experience. Although the language we use to describe our apprehension of an object is similar, at the subtler level, the way we apprehend that object is totally unique to us.

How do I know that the table in my living room exists? I can experience it with the senses, but why label it 'table', and not 'a pile of wood'? Because its legs and tops are constructed in such a way that I can use it as a table. I know it has its function. For me 'table' is a concept -- something I use to eat at, to read at, and to work at.

Does this table -- the concept of table, the thing that functions in this way -- exist outside of my consciousness? Naturally the wood exists with the top and 4 legs, but does the object 'table' exist without my mind giving it a label? The Chittamatrans would say no.

The only way I can prove something exists is by my perception; therefore the thing, cannot exist apart from my perception. The table exists because my eye consciousness sees it. On that base, we build the entire 'conceptualized aspect' as a table

This is quite difficult to accept if we come at it with our standard logic.

They assert that the object we label 'table' exists, but to prove that the table exists requires consciousness. There is no other way except through smelling, seeing, hearing, touching, etc. **This is something really worth investigating.**

Only the mind can prove the existence of something. That does not mean the thing is just in our mind. But things only exist when consciousness apprehends them. **That we see consciousness and object as separate is, in the chittamatra view, the starting point of all our mistakes.**