

This will be a very brief explanation of the two truths, relative truth and ultimate truth.

Because the text is brief, I have added my explanation to clarify it. The original text is in bold.

Relative truth is our experience of all relative phenomena, which we typically consider to be truly existent and substantial, without investigating their true nature.

Relative truth is what is accepted as true by convention. An example of relative truth would be talking about sunrise and sunset. When we talk of sunrise and sunset we are saying the Earth is stationary and the Sun revolves around it. Although this is not true, through convention we talk as if it is true and can ask, “Has the Sun set yet?”

All of our conceptual thoughts, the words we speak, and everything we see, all material objects, are said to be *conditioned* because they arise through causes and conditions. All conditioned things belong to the category of relative truth.

One example of a conditioned object is a rainbow. Although it appears to have an independent existence, it only appears when the light of the Sun is refracted through raindrops and you are in the correct position to see the light. As a conditioned object it has no independent existence on its own. It is not born and does not cease. It only exists as the combination of its causes. Talking about the rainbow as if it were real is a relative or conventional truth.

If we don't investigate their nature, we assume they have some sort of true inherent existence, but that is a mistaken perception based on not understanding the essential true nature of things. When we do investigate, we find that all the conditioned things of relative truth lack any real essence, even at the most subtle level. Not one of them has even the slightest particle of true existence.

Not only rainbows, but all material objects are conditioned, although how they are conditioned is often not obvious without thinking about it. Much of the explanation in Nagarjuna's *Root Text of the Middle Way* is an explanation of the different way which objects are conditioned.

So for instance, if we really look at the nature of this page, if we take apart the page of paper and ink and look closely at the particles that come together to create it, eventually we find there is no real inherent page here. When we truly examine the nature of all phenomena in that way, there is nothing to be found; there is no true substantial existence to be found there.

If a material object has parts, it only exists dependent on those parts. A page is paper and ink. It only exists dependent on these parts and is only a name for the combination of its parts. The same is true for chairs, tables, cars, and almost every object in our daily life. This analysis does not apply to every object. For example, it does not apply to empty space or the hypothetical indivisible particles that make up objects. For these objects there are different ways to show that they only exist in dependence.

Our modern scientific view of matter does not escape this analysis. The classical, philosophical view of atoms in ancient Greece and India was an attempt to reconcile the ideas of change and permanence in nature. It held that atoms were permanent and change was due to the temporary combinations of these atoms. The modern view of matter developed out of the classical, but differs in that atoms, or subatomic particles are no longer considered permanent. And instead of being concrete physical objects occupying a definite region of space these particles are described as probability fields described by a mathematical equation. But these ultimate components of matter also are dependent objects. They depend on how they are measured, or observed. You probably have heard that if observed one way an atom acts like a particle and if observed in another, it acts as a wave. This shows the dependent nature of the atom, it is dependent on how it interacts with an observation.

This is also true of our physical body. We generally take the true existence of our body for granted, even thinking this *is me* and *this is my body*, and it's very real to us. But again, if we examine closely, we will find that it actually has no inherent nature.

The physical body is made up of parts, so the same argument that applies to a page applies to it.

The ideas of *me* and *mine* are also conditioned and only exist conventionally. For example, the copyright. A book an author writes belongs to them even if it is a copy printed by a different publisher. But it is only theirs for a limited period of time, originally fourteen years and now longer. So the book is the author's, but this right is conditioned by law. All ownership is like this, it is a creature of law, and exists conditioned by law. There are societies where you could not own land. The idea that you could buy and sell the Earth was unacceptable. This is not to say all ideas of ownership are equal, there are pragmatic reasons for them. But all are conditioned by law and custom.

The idea of *me* is also conditioned. The self is either identical with the body or mind or separate from them. If it is separate, it is difficult to say what that relation could be or how the two could be inseparable. The self is believed to be identical through life, but the body constantly changes. Our language is inconsistent. We say, "my head hurts" as if me and my head are separate, but also "I hurt." We also say "my mind is confused" and "I am confused." So we are not clear on what the self might be.

The self is no more than a name we apply to a changing set of phenomena. Our identity and the identity of others is dependent on a combination of factors. And just as an object made up of parts is only a name for the collection of parts, the identity of a person is only a name for this combination of factors. For example, Homer is the author of the *Illiad* and the *Oddesey*. If we discovered the the two works had separate authors, would there be two Homers or no Homer? People describe me as the child of my parents. If I discover that they were not really my parents, would that mean I was not really me?

Your identity and sense of self is only a matter of convention. To anyone who does database programming this is known as the problem of finding a natural identifier for a record in the database. That is, find a field to include the database that uniquely identifies the record and will not change. There is no general solution to this problem, so it is recommended not to use natural identifiers.

All conditioned phenomena are like this, and not as we perceive them to be. None of them are truly existent, and so all compounded phenomena, which we experience as truly existent because we are under the influence of delusion, are actually merely relative truth.

A conditioned object only exists in dependence on its parts and on its causes. Because it only exists as a result of this dependence, it is not ultimately real. It is only said to be real by convention. Conventional truth asks, "Did you take the garbage out?" The smart alack student answers, "I see no garbage. I only see empty cans, banana peels, and so on. This garbage you speak of has no real existence." Garbage is the name conventionally applied to these things.

Ultimate truth is emptiness, but it isn't the kind of emptiness that means nothing is there, like when you look at a glass and you see no liquid inside so you say *it's empty*.

To say that something is empty is to say something we think should be there is not. To understand what Buddhism means by emptiness we need to know what that is.

Rather, ultimate truth is the natural emptiness that pervades all appearances.

Everything that exists depends on other causes and conditions. Because it cannot arise without these, it is empty, not just by chance, but necessarily.

It is the essence that is the basis for the arising of all things.

Everything arises when its causes and conditions are there and everything ceases when they become absent. If something existed independently, in and of itself, it

would be permanent, but nothing is like that. The causes and conditions are more than the physical cause, such as a seed and plant, is the entire set of things that makes you say that something is present.

When we investigate the true nature of all that appears to us, we will find it has no intrinsic nature; there is nothing to indicate anything we see has an independent and true existence.

The intrinsic nature of a thing is what makes it to be what it is. For example, the sweetness and whiteness of sugar. But when you examine what the relation between an object and its intrinsic nature must be, you run into paradox. If the intrinsic nature is separate from the object, then the object can exist apart from it and it is not the intrinsic nature. If they are identical, then it is only another name for the object and not something real and distinct from it. Nothing has an intrinsic nature and what we consider its nature only exists in dependence on other objects. The sweetness of sugar depends upon the tongue and its whiteness on the eye.

Rather, we find that the essence of those things is emptiness, and this is the natural emptiness which pervades all phenomena.

When we say all phenomena are empty, we mean that no phenomena has an intrinsic nature. All phenomena only exist dependent on other causes and conditions. In this sense emptiness is the essence of all things and pervades all phenomena.

The ultimate truth is this emptiness; from the perspective of the ultimate truth, we find that no phenomenon has any true existence whatsoever, not even the smallest fraction of a particle's worth of true existence.

An ultimate truth is established not just by observation, but also by reason, because appearances can be deceiving. For example, a man delirious with fever may see an elephant in his room. But then he reasons that the door is too narrow to let an elephant enter and the floor too weak to support it. In that way what appears can be understood to be real or not. The only proposition that survives rational analysis is that all phenomena are empty of having an intrinsic nature. So emptiness is an ultimate truth, the only ultimate truth.

This is true of our subjective mind, as well as all its objects, the phenomena that appear to it. Neither subject nor object has any inherent true existence.

Your mind and its thoughts can be analyzed in the same way as physical objects and shown to be empty by the same arguments.

There is no mind that is a substantial entity, something that can be found and identified as such; it can't be located or pinpointed anywhere, so the nature of mind is also emptiness.

There are two ways to understand the emptiness of the mind. The first way is to establish that all objects are empty through arguments like the ones here and then apply the same analysis to the mind.

When we actually look inward and fully investigate the true nature of our own mind, our understanding of this will come from direct experience.

The second way is through the practice of meditation. First you concentrate the mind and then observe it to try to see what its nature might be. No matter how hard you look, you will not find this nature and then you realize that never has had one. This is understanding emptiness through direct experience.

The more we investigate and understand the nature of our mind through meditation, the more we will purify obscurations and develop realization, and thereby give rise to the enlightened qualities.

When you are angry, there must be the idea of a self that is harmed or frustrated. When you realize there is no self, there is no place for the anger to take hold and it becomes a momentary emotion, like a stick drawing a line in water. The negative qualities obscure the positive qualities of enlightenment just as the bright light of the Sun obscures the stars. When the Sun sets, the stars are seen.

This is because the inherent enlightened qualities and realization all lie within the empty nature of our mind, because emptiness is not just nothingness, emptiness is characterized by the enlightened qualities. It is because of this nature of emptiness that we give rise to the enlightened qualities when we gain full realization of the ultimate truth.

Emptiness is not nothingness and does not negate the truth that qualities exist conventionally. The enlightened qualities of the mind are beyond concepts. Because they are beyond concepts, they are not subject to the same analysis as concepts and is not refuted through the arguments that show the emptiness of intrinsic nature. But the enlightened qualities should not be understood as a true nature or intrinsic nature of the mind. If there are regarded as such, they would be refuted by analysis of the emptiness of all phenomena.

Nagarjuna said that there is nothing that is not emptiness, and there is nothing that is not dependently originated. By *dependently originated* he meant arising through karmic interdependence. Karmic interdependence and emptiness are actually inseparable. Karmic interdependence is the intricate weaving together of causes, conditions, and karmic results, and so karmic interdependence itself is also empty in nature. Thus, the truth of karmic interdependence directly and naturally points to the truth of emptiness, and they are inseparable.

Nagarjuna identified emptiness with dependent origination in his commentary *Root Text of the Middle Way*. The Sanskrit word for dependent origination is *pratiyasamutpada*. It is the twelve links depicted on the mandala of the Wheel of Life, from Ignorance up to Birth and then Death. The reason that Nagarjuna said the two are identical is that change, as depicted in the Wheel of Life, is impossible to understand if phenomena are not empty. If they had an intrinsic nature, they would always continue to be. But because they are empty, phenomena only persist as long as their causes and conditions and are dependently originated.

And as I said before, this applies to more than the cause and effect of science. When we see a group of birds together, we say they are a flock. If the birds fly in different directions, we say the flock disappeared. But the flock only existed as a name for a group of birds, it never had any concrete physical existence. And there are many more phenomena like this.

So this is my attempt to provide a somewhat longer explanation of emptiness and the two truths. I hope that you find some value in the explanation and are motivated to study the topic in more detail than I have given here.