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# Does a Table Have Buddha-Nature? A Moment of Yes and No. Answer! But Not in Words or Signs: Reply to Siderits

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IN WORDS OR SIGNS! A RESPONSE TO MARK SIDERITS

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# DOES A TABLE HAVE BUDDHA-NATURE? A MOMENT OF YES AND NO. ANSWER! BUT NOT IN WORDS OR SIGNS! A RESPONSE TO MARK SIDERITS

**Yasuo Deguchi**

**Jay L. Garfield**

**Graham Priest**

## *Introduction*

We thank Mark Siderits for his insightful and rigorous treatment of our heresy. He raises exactly the right problems for our view, and provides us with an opportunity to articulate it with perhaps more clarity. We find it interesting that Siderits' own position is not all that far from ours, a discovery not surprising since his (in)famous slogan regarding the ultimate truth—however much he disavows its literal reading—inspires our own thought on this matter to no small degree. So, however orthodox Siderits' own views may be, we thank him for his contribution to our own heretical take on Madhyamaka.

We agree with Siderits that careful exegesis is an important element of this debate. But our approaches to exegesis may diverge at times: while Siderits is more concerned to situate the texts in their own historical context, we urge a more "open" hermeneutical approach, one which allows the deployment of anachronistic developments and techniques to illuminate ideas implicit in texts of which their own authors and audiences may have only been dimly aware. While the discussion here is not principally addressed to hermeneutic method, we do note that some of what might seem like argument at cross-purposes indeed reflects somewhat different hermeneutical strategies. We take ours to be vindicated not only on general Gadamerian grounds, but also by its fecundity; we recognize that some traditionalists may not be convinced.

We prefix our main comments with some preliminary comments on the *catuskoṭi*. In its earliest appearances, the *catuskoṭi* is a trope of logic predating the Buddha, and serves to delimit the possible answers to any given question: a sort of law of excluded fifth. True, on some issues the Buddha refused to endorse any of the *koṭis*, but this is not the same as denying them all.<sup>1</sup> As Siderits notes, the deployment of the *catuskoṭi* is somewhat different in the context of Madhyamaka. But before we get to Madhyamaka, we would like to offer one observation in passing regarding the presence of the *catuskoṭi* at all in the dialectical landscape of Buddhism, however rhetorical, parameterized, and non-paradoxical that appearance may be. The very fact that all four *koṭis* are in play in early Buddhist thought demonstrates that these conceptual possibilities regarding truth were taken seriously in India and in the Buddhist tradition; indeed the even more polyvalent Jain logic coeval with Buddhist philosophical

thought suggests a broader interest in the transcendence of a paradigm according to which truth and falsity can be presupposed to be mutually exclusive. While matters close down in the wake of Dignāga's and Dharmakīrti's regimentation, we can see the period of Buddhist thought right up to the development and flourishing of Madhyamaka as redolent with paraconsistent possibilities.

Of course this does not mean that Pāli or Abhidharmika Buddhists expressly endorsed contradictions. Nor does it mean that Mādhyamikas, including Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti, expressly endorsed contradictions. We agree with Siderits that they did not. Instead we will be arguing that although these thinkers did not explicitly avow the truth of contradictions, they nonetheless developed a philosophical point of view that is profound, cogent, even true, and nonetheless contradictory, and that they are committed explicitly to each conjunct of relevant limit contradictions, and hence to the contradictions themselves. Their commitment to the cogency of the *catuṣkoṭi*, moreover, allows them a route to the cogent avowal of these contradictory conclusions.

Siderits moves into the relevant dialectical forum when he says:

But things look rather different when we move to the Madhyamaka context, since now the presupposition of failure is no longer local but global. What Nāgārjuna does repeatedly in the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (MMK) is to show that the presupposition that there are things with intrinsic nature leads to contradiction. To reject the claim that there are things whose nature is intrinsic is to deny that there are any ultimate truths whatever. And if we take this to mean that the very idea of ultimate truth is incoherent, then the audience can no longer take solace in the thought that the taken-for-granted presupposition is a mere useful fiction, something that misses important details of the full final picture.

Here Siderits anticipates the first of the limit contradictions we identify in Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka: the claim that all phenomena are empty of intrinsic nature, and that that emptiness is their intrinsic nature. It would follow immediately from this thesis that since the ultimate truth of things is their emptiness of intrinsic nature, there both is an ultimate truth (their lack of that nature) and is none (since, lacking any intrinsic nature, things lack emptiness). He also points out correctly that it is impossible to save the position from paradox by retreating to the claim that the ultimate truth is ineffable (though this is, as we argue, not necessarily a retreat, but rather an embrace of yet another paradox), as this leads straight to an expressibility paradox.

But Siderits suggests that there is a *non-paradoxical* understanding of this central Madhyamaka thesis, namely "the abandonment of all seeking after the final grand theory of everything. And this is what I [Siderits] suspect Nāgārjuna had in mind." We agree that this is what Nāgārjuna had in mind. We *disagree* only regarding whether it is paradoxical. (To insist, as Siderits does, that there is no ultimate truth is not to defuse the paradox. It is to assert half of it. The hard work must come in undercutting the other half.)

Before we get down to the serious business of Madhyamaka exegesis and dialectics, we also want to note our acceptance of Siderits' presentation of the *pakṣa* and of the relevant *lakṣana* in the debate at hand. Siderits puts it this way:

The dialetheist interpretation of Madhyamaka attributes to the ultimate reality of emptiness various contradictory properties. The question is whether this move does not undermine the point of emptiness.

Siderits says it does; we say that it does not. This is the topic of the debate.

Lectio

Siderits notes correctly that an important argument for the possibility of the negative *catuṣkoṭi* is the semantic claim endorsed by Candrakīrti that it is only possible to deny, as well as to assert, a sentence that has a determinate sense. One could then justify the rejection of the third and fourth *koṭis*, he argues, by noting that neither makes any sense. The appropriate form of negation is what he calls “illocutionary” or what we call elsewhere “external” negation (*paryudasa/med dgag*).<sup>2</sup> This kind of negation denies the truth of a sentence while implicating neither the existence of the subject of the sentence nor its possession of any properties other than what the sentence denied ascribes to it. So, in this account, the apparently paradoxical denial of the fourth *koṭi* following the apparently banal denial of the third is not paradoxical after all. It is neither true that *p* nor not true that *p* when the subject of *p* simply does not exist in the relevant sense—in this case, ultimately. The negative *catuṣkoṭi* in this reading is then nothing more than a systematic argument against the ultimate reality of the subject of the sentence.

The example to which Siderits draws our attention here, however, is the discussion of the temporal extent of *saṃsāra* in chapter XXII, in which, in fact, an explicit use of the *catuṣkoṭi* does not occur. If we attend to verse 11 of that chapter, which is an explicit negative *catuṣkoṭi*, things are a bit different:

We do not assert “Empty.”  
We do not assert “Non-empty.”  
We neither assert both nor neither.  
They are used only for the purpose of designation.

We refer to Tsongkhapa’s commentary here, which follows Candrakīrti very closely (enough so that it is virtually a plagiarism). We focus on the commentary on the crucial final two lines:

We do not assert both of these; nor do we assert neither that he exists nor does not exist because ultimately none of these four alternatives can be maintained. On the other hand, if we did not assert these conventionally, those to whom we speak would not understand us. So, from the standpoint of conventional truth and for conventional purposes, we say “empty” and “nonempty,” “both empty and nonempty,” and “neither empty nor nonempty.” We say these having mentally imputed them from the perspective of those people to whom we are speaking.<sup>3</sup>

Here the point seems plain: from the ultimate standpoint nothing can be said, even though from the conventional standpoint we can say quite a lot. This verse and the commentary pick up two relevant themes. First, the ultimate really is inexpressible.

Nothing we say about it conventionally captures it. This leads directly to the expressibility paradox, as Siderits concedes. More on this below.

Second, the denial of all four *koṭis* is predicated not on presupposition failure, but rather on the fact that none of the four is ultimately true. Siderits contends that Nāgārjuna is indicating that the presupposition that there is an ultimately existing dharma that could be empty, non-empty, both, or neither is at issue, and that Nāgārjuna rejects all four *koṭis* on the ground that that presupposition is not satisfied. That may be an admissible reading, but it is neither Candrakīrti's nor Tsongkhapa's nor ours, and it is hardly an obvious reading. We follow Candrakīrti and Tsongkhapa in taking Nāgārjuna at face value here. That is, we agree that he intends to say that the statement that things are empty is not true, nor is its negation or their conjunction or their mutual denial. The statement that things are empty can at best be conventionally true. This in turn is because of the ultimate truth that all things are empty, a statement that is not ultimately true. We are back to paradox. Siderits' attempt to block this paradox, we emphasize, is—although not incoherent as a reading—a departure not only from the most obvious reading of the text on its own, but also from the reading offered by major canonical exegetes. His salvation of consistency has a whiff of desperation about it.

Siderits argues that his reading is confirmed by another apparently paradoxical verse, *MMK XVIII.8*, which we translate (from the Tibetan) as follows:

Everything is real and is not real;  
Both real and unreal;  
Neither real nor unreal;  
This is the Lord Buddha's teaching.

Siderits reads it (from the Sanskrit) as follows:

All is real, or all is unreal, all is both real and unreal,  
All is neither unreal nor real; this is the graded teaching of the Buddha.

The issue here concerns the translation of the Sanskrit *anuśācnam* or Tibetan *rje su bstan* as *teaching* versus *graded teaching*. It can go either way, and the commentators take these terms both ways. Interestingly, while Candrakīrti glosses this verse as Siderits does, as emphasizing different teachings for different audiences, Buddhapālita (244a–245a) reads this very verse as indicating that while conventionally things can be either real or unreal, or even both, ultimately things have no nature at all and are hence neither real nor unreal, by virtue of their emptiness. And this takes us straight back to paradox. So, even if we were to follow Siderits, and take this verse as relevant to the present argument, the case is both a translational and an exegetical draw.

Let us return to *MMK XV.7–8* and the commentary, again following Tsongkhapa, who in turn draws heavily on Candrakīrti. In *XV.7*, Nāgārjuna introduces the idea of the emptiness of emptiness. Tsongkhapa, commenting on this, argues as follows:

Suppose it were maintained that emptiness were even the slightest bit truly existent. Then one would undoubtedly have to maintain that that which it qualifies—the basis—is at

least the slightest bit truly existent. This is because it is impossible for the quality to exist without the qualified phenomenon on which it is grounded, and it would be contradictory for something truly existent to be grounded on something whose existence is false. Thus, the *mādhyaṃika* and the reificationist agree about this point. But the reificationist maintains that both emptiness and its basis are truly existent. The *mādhyaṃika*, on the other hand, says that since the basis is not truly existent, emptiness is not truly existent either.<sup>4</sup>

The important point here, of course, is the emptiness of emptiness, a doctrine that Siderits and we agree is at the core not only of Nāgārjuna's and Candrakīrti's *Mādhyaṃika*, but of our dispute. When Candrakīrti and Tsongkhapa argue that emptiness is empty, they are arguing that it, too, is dependently arisen and has no essence. We agree that this does not yet by itself land in paradox. But XV.7 is a preamble to XV.8, and things get more interesting there.

Commenting on the claim that "emptiness is the elimination of all views" (XV.8) Candrakīrti (as does Tsongkhapa, quoting him) deploys the simile of the man in the shop who, upon being told that there is nothing for sale asks to buy some of that nothing. Tsongkhapa paraphrases Candrakīrti, drawing the following conclusion:

Similarly, when it is demonstrated that entities do not exist inherently, it is not that one should not take them to be truly empty, but that one should not take the entities' emptiness of true existence to be truly existent. Therefore, to maintain that this text [the *Ratnākuta-sūtra*, from which the simile is drawn] shows that if you take phenomena to be empty you will be incurable would be to make a strong claim with no justification.

According to both of these masters [Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti], to hold emptiness as a view means to be fixated on emptiness as an entity—that is, to grasp emptiness as truly existent or as existing inherently. So how could this be to grasp emptiness as mere essencelessness?<sup>5</sup>

Siderits argues that "this does not seem to show that Candrakīrti thinks of emptiness as a nature that is no nature." We disagree. To say that to "grasp emptiness as mere essencelessness" "is not that one should not take them to be truly empty" is to land oneself squarely in paradox. We should take it that things are truly empty, that is, that their ultimate nature is emptiness, and that the ultimate nature of that emptiness is emptiness, and so on, all the way down. And that emptiness is mere essencelessness, that is, the lack of any ultimate nature. And so, the ultimate nature of things is to lack any ultimate nature, and the ultimate nature of that lack of ultimate nature is its lack of any ultimate nature, and so on, all the way down. Paradox.

Finally, we come back to the central verses, XXIV.18–19, in which Nāgārjuna argues that emptiness is a dependent designation, is merely conventionally real, and is equivalent to dependent origination (*prajñaptir-upadāya*), hence both reinforcing the doctrine of the emptiness of emptiness and identifying the two truths ontologically. Siderits agrees with us when he says that Candrakīrti is committed to the view that "emptiness is a conceptual construction and not ultimately real." But, he argues, although "we are confronted with something *prima facie* odd here," this is

not precisely the contradictory claim that emptiness is a nature that is no nature. To get that from what we are given here we would need the Mādhyamika to say that there are ultimately real *dharma*s whose nature it is to be empty. Then, since nothing that is empty can be found at the ultimate level, that emptiness is itself empty (that it is a “dependent concept” or *upadāya prajñapti*) would entail that ultimately it is no nature, and we would have a contradiction at the ultimate level.

Siderits argues that Candrakīrti avoids this contradiction precisely by virtue of embracing the emptiness of emptiness. He continues:

So DGP are right to see a contradiction in the vicinity of the claim that all things are characterized by emptiness. The question is whether Candrakīrti affirms it as ultimately true. The answer, in a word, is no. All things being empty, emptiness has no locus. . . . Candrakīrti avoids the contradiction without embracing nihilism by invoking the emptiness of emptiness, making it something that is only conventionally real.

When Candrakīrti responds that emptiness depends for its existence on its counterpositive (and thus is itself empty), he is in effect calling emptiness a mere useful device. . . . That all things are empty is not ultimately true—in the opponent’s sense.

There are several problems with this exegesis, which—we should point out—would delight the most orthodox dGe lugs apologist. Let us begin with the fallacious argument that Siderits attributes to us. He claims that we move straight from the claim that “emptiness is not ultimately real” to the conclusion that “it is a nature that is no nature,” and points out that that inference would need to be mediated by a premise that no Mādhyamika would accept, namely “that there are ultimately real *dharma*s whose nature it is to be empty.” That *is* the argument of one of the *purvapakṣas* Candrakīrti addresses. But it is not ours.

We argued not from the need for a *basis* of emptiness, but from Nāgārjuna’s and Candrakīrti’s own characterization of emptiness itself—that emptiness is the lack of any nature—and from their assertion that all phenomena are in fact empty, and necessarily so. We did not, like the *purvapakṣa* with whom Siderits confuses us, take this to be a *reductio* on the Mādhyamaka position, reducing it to a choice between nihilism and reification, but instead a cogent explication of the paradoxical nature of reality. This is, hence, no refutation either of our reading or of our argument.

Siderits’ second point is that the embrace of the emptiness of emptiness, and the denial of an ultimately real locus to emptiness, saves Candrakīrti from contradiction because “that all things are empty is not ultimately true—in the opponent’s sense.” This, too, fails to defend consistency. To be sure, that all things are empty is not true in the *opponent’s* sense, but it is true in *Candrakīrti’s* sense. Bracketing the paradox of inexpressibility that looms over this discussion for a moment, the Mādhyamika cannot consistently (or even cogently) refuse to endorse the doctrine of the two truths, and cannot refuse to endorse the claim that the ultimate truth is the emptiness of all phenomena, even if that ultimate truth, so expressed, is also a conventional truth. Candrakīrti must assert that truth in *some* sense. In *that* sense, “that all things are empty” *is ultimately true*, and expresses their true nature, which is to have no nature. Paradox.



This connects to another claim Siderits advances against us:

That all *dharmas* are empty is not a thesis affirmed . . . by the Mādhyamika. . . . [It] is one component of a *prasaṅga* . . . meant to show the error of the opponent's realist ways. It is what the Mādhyamika thinks the opponent must affirm given their other commitments. . . . The resulting contradiction—that all things have a nature that is no nature—nicely expresses the Madhyamaka strategy for imploding the realist's notional world. It is not something a Mādhyamika would themselves independently assert as a correct characterization of the nature of things.

We first note that Siderits grants that the claim that all dharmas are empty entails what we have called Nāgārjuna's paradox. Given that he accepts this, the attempt to avoid the paradox by denying that Mādhyamikas in fact assert that all dharmas (that is phenomena) are empty is patently desperate. Nāgārjuna asserts this at XXIV.19, for instance. (Siderits' claim that he does not is simply false. To say that no non-empty dharma [phenomenon] is to be found is to say that they are all empty.) This is also a central claim in all of the *Prajñāparamitā-sūtras* (and indeed we find the claim that "all phenomena have one nature—that is, no nature" in the *Astahaṣṛika-prajñāparamitā*). Statements of this kind are simply too numerous to count.

Siderits grants the frequency of claims like this, as asks us to set aside the *Prajñāparamitā* literature. While this is odd in the context of Madhyamaka exegesis, we can accept these rules of debate for now, for the argument that now focuses directly on the relevant *śāstra* literature is also unconvincing. For he asks us now to take all statements to the effect that all things are empty "not as a proposition but as a provocation—an intervention justified entirely by its success." We take Siderits to mean that Nāgārjuna and other Mādhyamikas do not take the central thesis of Madhyamaka—that all phenomena are empty of intrinsic nature—to be true in any sense.

Siderits asks us to take commentaries on MMK XXII.11 as evidence for this claim. But the text he cites does not support this reading at all. Candrakīrti denies that the statement is *ultimately* true, to be sure, but that is because Candrakīrti follows Nāgārjuna in believing that there is no ultimate truth (and that this is the ultimate truth), which hardly avoids paradox, and hardly avoids the claim that the statement that things are empty of intrinsic nature is conventionally true, and in fact is made true because it asserts the ultimate nature of things.

As Siderits notes, when Bhāviveka acknowledges the apparent (or real) contradiction here, he tries to defuse it by referring to the analogy Nāgārjuna develops in the *Vigrahavyāvartanī*. One might try to get people to be quiet by shouting "Quiet!" In the same way, to say that all things are empty is not to make a claim, but to order people to see things as empty. But this fails as an attempt to defuse paradox. One could then ask why one should order people to do this. The answer is plain: because that is how things are. Indeed, if they were not, the Mādhyamika would appear to be involved in something of a confidence trick. The justification of the order takes one back to the fundamental contradiction.

Now, there is something important in the neighborhood of this objection that is worthy of note. In the *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, as well as in the final verse of the MMK,

Nāgārjuna does claim to assert no thesis, and to have no view. There are various ways to read this. One way might appear to lend support to the line we have just been considering, namely that when a Mādhyamika uses language s/he is merely deploying tools, and not making assertions.

There is something right about this. Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti clearly do develop an instrumental view of meaning, and neither would hold that a referential semantics is the foundation of a theory of meaning. On the other hand, one of the many uses of language is assertion. And so, while they do not regard assertion as fundamental, when they say this they are asserting it. They believe it—even if they only believe that it is conventionally true that what explains the possibility of their assertion is a broader account of meaning in terms of use.

We can also read these assertions of thesislessness or positionlessness as assertions that Mādhyamikas make no claims about the ultimate nature of things, by virtue of the fact that emptiness is not the ultimate nature of things but the absence of any such nature.<sup>6</sup> This, of course, takes us straight back to the paradox at issue, as well as into the paradox of expressibility. After all, if things have no ultimate nature, and if that is what it is to be empty, the moment that we say that emptiness is the ultimate nature of things we have ascribed them an ultimate nature and failed to express it by virtue of having done so.

Siderits also denies that the paradox of expressibility is a genuine paradox. His denial of this paradox rests on his denial that Mādhyamikas in fact endorse the claim that there is an inexpressible ultimate, maintaining that this is in fact a doctrine restricted to Yogācāra. Let us restrict ourselves to the writings of Candrakīrti in refuting this extraordinary claim. Commenting on the homage verses of the *MMK*, Candrakīrti, in the *Prasannapadā*, says, “when one perceives the way dependent origination really is, there is no engagement of mind and mental processes” (04a). He quotes the *Bodhisattvapitaka-sūtra* at 120a: “What is ultimate truth? Where there is no wandering of the mind there is no need to talk about words.” In the *Madhyamakāvatāra-bhāṣya*, Candrakīrti says, “all engagement of mind and mental episodes is terminated at the level of Buddhahood” (256a). In that context, Candrakīrti approvingly quotes the *Mahāmegha-sūtra*: “The ultimate is unarisen, unceased, indestructible, not coming, not going, inexpressible in words, indescribable through words, incomprehensible through mental fabrications” (314a). We could go on for quite a while. The point is that Candrakīrti, for one, would hardly accept defense of the consistency of his position on the ground that he never accepts an indescribable ultimate. And as Siderits concedes, this position leads straight to paradox.

We might also note in this context that both the *Madhyamakāloka* and *Satyadvaya-vibhāga*, central texts in the exposition of Madhyamaka in India, each insist that the ultimate is inexpressible, and each also—perhaps worried by this very paradox—urges that the ultimate must be subdivided into two categories: a literal ultimate that is beyond expression and which is the object of non-conceptual apprehension and a figurate ultimate, which is the content of verbal or conceptual expressions of ultimate truth. The failure of this move to avoid paradox is obvious, but the insistence that

genuine ultimate truth is true and inexpressible is patent.<sup>7</sup> We conclude that Siderits has not succeeded in an exegetical refutation of our reading of *Madhyamaka* as paradoxical.

### Applicatio

To recall now what we actually say: we wish to emphasize that ours is not a straightforward representation of classical commentary, but a friendly amendment to *Madhyamaka*, and would be recognized as such by some, though not all, *Mādhyamikas*. We argue not that *Madhyamaka* is incoherent by virtue of being contradictory, but that the deepest and most important insights of *Madhyamaka* are revealed in the paradoxes it articulates. We worry that attempts to save *Madhyamaka* by salvaging consistency vandalize the doctrine, not only failing to restore an unnecessary consistency, but also effacing deep metaphysics in the process.

We identify three fundamental contradictions in *Madhyamaka*, to each of which Siderits has denied that Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti are committed, each of which we have demonstrated to be immanent in central texts and arguments.<sup>8</sup> First, it is central to *Madhyamaka* that emptiness is the emptiness of intrinsic nature. That things are ultimately empty is affirmed, and, hence, it is affirmed that things have no intrinsic nature. But an intrinsic nature is a property that a thing has on its own, independently of all else, essentially “from its own side.” Emptiness is such a property. Hence, things, by virtue of being essentially empty, have an intrinsic nature, that is, emptiness, which is the absence of any intrinsic nature. We have shown that Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti are in fact committed to the truth of this contradiction.

Second, ultimate truth and conventional truth constitute a mutually exclusive and exhaustive partition of the domain of truth. But the ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate reality, and ultimate truth, for example the truth that all phenomena are empty of intrinsic nature, is the truth about ultimate reality. There is hence no truth-maker for ultimate truth, and hence no ultimate truth. But that is an ultimate truth. This is in fact Siderits’ own paradox, one we wish he did not orphan.

Finally, there is the paradox of expressibility. Since all words and concepts fabricate and falsify, and ultimate truth characterizes reality free from fabrication, just as it is, ultimate truth is inexpressible. But we have just expressed something true about it. This is a paradox of which Indian and Tibetan *Mādhyamikas* were well aware, but which is inescapable.<sup>9</sup>

At the beginning of this response, we quoted a statement Siderits makes in his introductory section:

The dialetheist interpretation of *Madhyamaka* attributes to the ultimate reality of emptiness various contradictory properties. The question is whether this move does not undermine the point of emptiness.

This is indeed the question. So let us ask, first, “what is the point of emptiness?” The point of emptiness is, according to Candrakīrti in his commentary on *MMK* XXIV.7,

the elimination of fabrication (*prapañca*), glossed elsewhere as the mistaken superimposition of intrinsic nature on that which is in fact empty of such nature, by virtue of being merely dependently originated, conventionally real; that is, emptiness is the antidote to mistaking conventional reality for ultimate reality. Does the recognition of paradox in ultimate reality really undermine this point?

We think not. To be ultimately real, Candrakīrti explains in the *Madhyamakāvatarebhāṣya*, is to withstand analysis, to have a determinate nature that can be comprehended. Nothing, he argues, can in fact withstand this kind of critical analysis; everything crumbles. Why? Ultimate reality is inconsistent; contradictions emerge from the supposition that anything is ultimately real. We cannot conceptualize the ultimate. But to take things as they are, conventionally, is easy, within the domain of thought and language, and in fact co-constitutive with that domain. To take things to be empty is thus to talk about and think about that which one can talk and think about in the only way that one can talk and think about. But that is to realize limits to thought and language, limits to the degree of the very reality of things. And we know that such limits are paradoxical. All of this is to deny that there is ultimate reality, and to deny that any statement can express ultimate truth. But that is the ultimate truth—that is what emptiness is, and what it is for. We do not undermine the point of emptiness: we explain it.

To undermine the point of emptiness would be to describe it in a way that does not end fabrication, that permits one to take that which is merely conventional to be ultimately real. How might one do that? Well, perhaps by denying that there is anything beyond conceptualization, suggesting that emptiness is fully conceptualizable, or by arguing that things are not really empty—that that assertion is mere *upāya*. That is what Siderits does. We fear that it is he, not we, who would destroy the middle way, and this simply out of the fear and awe of contradiction, as Wittgenstein put it.<sup>10</sup>

### *Conclusion: Madhyamaka Is Inconsistent (and Correct)*

Madhyamaka, we have argued, is inconsistent, and this despite the well-meaning protestations of some of the greatest Mādhyamikas, classical and present. Attempts to preserve its consistency, whether textual or dialectical, either fail, tame it to pointlessness, or both. But this inconsistency, we repeat, is not incoherence. We believe that Madhyamaka is profound precisely because it dares to go where no philosophers had gone before—or at least with such care: to the limits of being, thought, and language, to face the paradoxes that lie as those limits, and to demonstrate that those paradoxes show that reality itself is paradoxical. To understand our world and to live in it in an awakened way is not to resolve but to embrace that paradox.

This embrace of paradox is not undercut, but is undergirded by the recognition of the emptiness of emptiness, by the fact that emptiness itself has no intrinsic nature, and that this is its intrinsic nature. Gazing into the abyss of that inconsistent regress is to understand the self and phenomena, to discard the conception of self and phe-

nomena, and to affirm and to be affirmed by all things. Paradox of this kind is not a bar, but a gateway to awakening.

Siderits suggests at the end of his critique that in our insistence on the cogency and value of this reading that we are “pounding the table,” and so guilty of the very kind of *dr̥ṣṭi-grāha* to which Madhyamaka is meant to be an antidote. We think it goes the other way. We are opening a new option for reading Madhyamaka. To insist that it is inadmissible because this was not the explicit purport of classical Indian scholars is in fact to pound the table.

We conclude as does Siderits, agreeing with him completely and so refuting him:

The point here is a subtle one that is easily overlooked: it is that the ultimate nature of reality is something that is inexpressible and only cognizable non-conceptually because there is no such thing as the ultimate nature of reality. . . . The cognition of the ultimate nature of things—their all being empty of intrinsic nature—is non-conceptual because, there being nothing to cognize, no cognition arises.

## Notes

- 1 – As Siderits claims. Refusing to endorse something is consistent with being agnostic about it; rejecting it is not. And one may have many reasons for refusing to accept something, for example that it would be distracting. He also suggests that at this time the four *koṭis* are to be understood in terms of paramaterization. This strikes us as unlikely, if only because the quadrachotomy predates the Buddha, while the conventional/ultimate distinction does not. On the logic of the *catuṣkoṭi*, see Graham Priest, “The Logic of the Catuṣkoṭi,” *Comparative Philosophy* 1 (2010): 24–54, [www.comparativephilosophy.org](http://www.comparativephilosophy.org).
- 2 – Tsongkhapa, *Ocean of Reasoning: A Great Commentary On Nāgārjuna’s Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, trans. Geshe Ngawang Samten and Jay L. Garfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).
- 3 – *Ibid.*, p. 448.
- 4 – *Ibid.*, p. 297.
- 5 – *Ibid.*, p. 299.
- 6 – See Jay L. Garfield, “Emptiness and Positionlessness: Do the Mādhyamika Relinquish all Views?” *Journal of Indian Philosophy and Religion* 1 (1996): 1–34, reprinted in Jay L. Garfield, *Empty Words: Buddhist Philosophy and Cross-cultural Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 46–68; and see Jay L. Garfield, “Turning a Madhyamaka Trick: Reply to Huntington,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 36, no. 4 (2008): 428–449.
- 7 – See, further, our response to Constance Kassor in the present issue.

- 8 – For more on the following, see our response to Tom Tillemans in the present issue.
- 9 – Siderits asks how DGP are going to choose between true contradictions. We do not; we choose between contradictions, on the ground that some are true and that some are not.
- 10 – Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, ed. G. H. von Wright, Rush Rhees, and G.E.M. Anscombe, 3rd rev. ed. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978), pt. III, no. 17.