
Study Group - *Madhyamakavatanama*

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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དབྱིན་མ་ལ་འཇུག་པ་ཞེས་བྱ་བ་བརྟུགས་མོ། །

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As usual first generate the virtuous motivation of bodhicitta thinking, 'I have to place all sentient beings into the stainless state of liberation, and for that purpose I have to attain complete enlightenment'.

Why Hearers and Self Liberators Need to Realise Phenomena as Lacking Natural Existence

2.2.3.1.2. Showing this also to be according to the *Bodhisattva Charyavatara* (contd.)

Completely Abandoning the Afflictions

Last time we said that those paths with the apprehended object of true grasping cannot lead to liberation, as they cannot exhaust the afflictions. Why? It is because we can find manifest craving in the continuum of practitioners who have meditated on such a path. Therefore practitioners who follow the two *Knowledges*¹ alone cannot attain liberation. Why? It is because their meditation will not be free from the object of true grasping.

So the point is made quite clearly: without realising emptiness one will not be able to abandon craving. As it also says in the *Bodhisattva Charyavatara*²,

*The mind that is separated from emptiness
That stopped is generated again, similarly to
the meditative absorption without recognition.*

What this shows is that if one wants to practise a path that leads to liberation and omniscience, then one needs to rely on the path that realises the absence of inherent existence of the person, in addition to the aggregates.

What would happen if one didn't realise this emptiness? As the second line of the verse just quoted says, even though they have been abandoned the afflictions arise again. For example, by meditating on the path of the sixteen aspects of the Four Noble Truths as mentioned in the two *Knowledges*³, although one will be able to temporarily abandon the manifest coarse delusions, they will arise again later.

Practitioners who meditate on absorption without recognition have abandoned the five types of sense recognition and also coarse mental recognition, and abide on subtle mental recognition. However those various types of coarse recognition are just temporarily subdued because they have not actually been abandoned. Later when the practitioner arises out of their trance, then those various recognitions will arise again. Similarly by

meditating on those sixteen aspects as explained in the two texts by Asanga and Vasubandhu, although one can temporarily abandon grasping at the person as being self-supporting substantially existent, later on those delusions will arise again.

The point being made here is that Hinayana practitioners need to realise subtle emptiness in order to abandon the afflictions and attain liberation.

The Importance of the Realising the Selflessness of Phenomena

Previously the point was made in *Illumination* that without realising the selflessness of phenomena then one cannot realise the selflessness of person. Here the subject is hearer and self-liberated arhats. Hearer arhats and self-liberated arhats cannot realise the selflessness of person without the realising selflessness of phenomena. If the subject hearer arhats and self-liberated arhats don't realise the selflessness of phenomena, they will not accept the selflessness of the five aggregates, and then they won't be able to completely realise the selflessness of person.

It is said that a person's lack of inherent existence is the selflessness of person, and therefore the aggregates' lack of inherent existence is the selflessness of phenomena. Therefore the grasping at the aggregates as being inherently existent is the self-grasping at phenomena, and the grasping at the person as being inherently existent is the self-grasping at a person. Why? It is because the reasoning is the same.

There are some slight differences in the way the selflessness of person and the selflessness of aggregates is posited according to the different tenets. However regardless of what they posit as the selflessness of person, all tenets will say that in order to attain liberation one needs to realise the selflessness of person. So there's no positing the grasping at the self of person as anything else apart from an obscuration to liberation.

Obscurations to Liberation

What is established here is that the grasping at the self of phenomena belongs to the category of obscurations to liberation. All the schools will agree that the grasping at the self of person is an obscuration to liberation. What needs to be proved is that the self-grasping at phenomena is also an obscuration to liberation.

This is done by saying that first of all the self-grasping at the person is the grasping at the person as being inherently existing or naturally existing. Since the selflessness of phenomena is also the phenomena's or aggregates' lack of inherent existence, then the grasping at the aggregates as being inherently existent is the self-grasping at phenomena.

Since both the self-grasping at phenomena and the self-grasping at person are concepts grasping at inherent existence, therefore they both have to be obscurations to liberation. Did you get that? Was it clear that the grasping at the self of phenomena is an obscuration to liberation? *[students reply yes]*

So this establishes the uncommon tenet of the Prasangika that the self-grasping at phenomena belongs to the obscurations to liberation. All the lower Mahayana tenets say that the self-grasping at phenomena belongs to the obscurations to omniscience, while the Hinayana tenets don't even talk about the obscurations to omniscience. Those lower Mahayana tenets will usually posit the self-

¹ *Treasury of Knowledge* by Vasubandhu and the *Compendium of Knowledge* by Asanga

² *A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, Ch 9, verse 48. The numbering of the verse in *Compassion in Tibetan Buddhism* is different from that in the Batchelor, Padmakara and Wallace translations, which is used here.

³ See page 5

grasping at phenomena as being an obscuration to omniscience. The Prasangika say that the self-grasping at phenomena doesn't belong to the obscurations to omniscience, but that it is an obscuration to liberation. Their reasoning has just been stated.

2.2.3.2. Sources Proving That Hearers and Self-Liberators Need to Realise Emptiness in Order to Attain Liberation

Now we move to the various scriptural sources showing that arhats need to realise emptiness in order to attain liberation. These include the Mahayana sutras and commentaries, and also Hinayana sutras. For example if the Hinayanist accepts them, Mahayana sutras can be posited as a reasoning to a Hinayanist.

All tenets accept that an arya being realises the selflessness of a person directly. However it is not commonly accepted that an arya being realises firstly, the selflessness of phenomena directly and secondly, that the selflessness of person is actually the person's lack of inherent existence. That is the special Prasangika tenet.

2.2.3.2.1. Mahayana Sutras

We first start with the Mahayana sutras. Here there is the sutra called *Questions of Adhyashaya*.

Here a question is asked by the Buddha. There is a monk who, upon seeing a illusory woman that has been created by a magician, feels strong desire. Having recognised that his mind has been overcome by desire he becomes very ashamed, gets up, goes to another place and then meditates on the impurity, impermanent, suffering, empty and selfless aspects of the woman. Then the Buddha asks the bodhisattva, 'Son of good lineage is that a proper way of practising or is it not?'

The bodhisattva replies, 'A person who meditates on the impurity of a non-existent woman by meditating on the impermanent, suffering, empty, and selfless aspects is training in the wrong way.'

Then the Buddha replies, 'O son of good family, regardless of whether it's a monk, a nun, a male or a female lay person, by meditating on that which has neither been generated nor has arisen, as being impure, impermanent, suffering, empty, and selfless, I'm not saying that such a stupid person is meditating correctly, in fact I'm saying that they are meditating incorrectly.'

This quote establishes the need for the realisation of emptiness in order to attain liberation from the afflictions. The Buddha gives this example of a practitioner who after having seen an illusory woman meditates upon her impurity, impermanence, empty and selfless nature, and then says that if a practitioner meditates in such a way he won't be able to overcome attachment. Why? It is because that meditation is actually a wrong consciousness. The mind thinking that an illusory woman has all those features of impurity, impermanence and so on, is a wrong mind, and therefore is not able to act as the antidote to attachment. Why? It is because it is based on the premise that something that isn't a woman is a woman.

Likewise if one meditates on the impermanence, impurity, selflessness and empty nature of truly existing aggregates, then one will not be able to overcome the afflictions. Why? It is because one views that which lacks true existence as being truly existent, and then meditates on the sixteen

aspects of something that is actually non-existent. One will not be able to abandon the afflictions if one holds the non-truly existent aggregates to be truly existing, and then meditates on the impure, impermanent, suffering, empty, and selfless features of the truly existing aggregates, because that meditation will actually be a wrong consciousness.

It is accepted by the Prasangika system that it is possible to realise the sixteen aspects of the Four Noble Truths according to the lower tenets, and then to abandon the manifest coarse delusions temporarily through that meditation. There are followers of the lower tenets who in general might accept true existence, and who also in general accept inherent existence, but who don't necessarily qualify the aggregates as being inherently existent, or as being truly existent.

If a practitioner who, although accepting true existence and inherent existence in general, doesn't qualify or discern the aggregates as being inherently existent or truly existent, and then meditates on the sixteen aspects of the aggregates, then that meditation is a valid meditation, and it can become a path.

So there's a difference between the wrong path of meditating on the sixteen aspects of the aggregates after having qualified them as being truly existent, and meditating on the sixteen aspects of the five aggregates without holding the aggregates as being inherently existent, even though generally accepting inherent existence. That second meditation is a valid meditation.

Next *Illumination* gives a quote from another Mahayana sutra called, *The Miserliness Of Superior Meditative Absorption*. Without quoting it in detail, what it basically says is the same point - that in order to attain liberation one needs to realise the empty nature of the Four Noble Truths.

Having dealt with that very briefly then we go onto the next quote, which is from the *Diamond Cutter Sutra*.

The *Diamond Cutter Sutra* first of all says,

Subhuti, what should one make of this? Does a stream enterer think, 'I have attained the fruit of a stream enterer'? Subhuti: 'Oh Buddha, it isn't like that. If it is asked for what reason, Ven Buddha, it is for the reason that they haven't entered anything. Then they are called stream enterer.'

Oh Buddha, in case a stream enterer would think, 'I have attained the fruit of a stream enterer', then they would be grasping at that self. They would be grasping at sentient beings, at life, at a person.'

Subhuti says, 'No, stream enterers wouldn't think like that'. Why wouldn't they think like that? It is because they have abandoned the three fetters that are the abandonments of seeing. So they have abandoned the intellectually acquired true-grasping, and since they have abandoned the intellectually acquired true-grasping they would neither view themselves nor their attainment as being truly existent. So therefore they wouldn't say, 'I, the truly existent stream enterer, have attained the truly existent result of a stream enterer'.

Subhuti says, 'Buddha, the stream enterer doesn't think, "the truly existent person has attained the result of a stream enterer". Why not? It is because if they thought like that, then what would follow is that they would have the intellectually acquired true grasping - self-grasping at

the person. They would also grasp at inherently existent, truly existent sentient beings, they would grasp at a truly existent life force, they would grasp at a truly existent person.

Then there comes a doubt. What does the non-grasping of the stream enterer, as in 'I have attained the result of a stream enterer on the basis of viewing the 'I' as truly existent', refer to? This comes about because that practitioner has refuted the object of true grasping. The previously mentioned non-grasping comes about through the force of having refuted the object of true grasping, and it doesn't mean that the practitioner doesn't have innate true grasping.

So there's a doubt as to what this quote from the sutra actually shows. It doesn't show that the stream enterer doesn't have innate true grasping. What it does show is that they have refuted the object of the true grasping. Through the force of having eliminated the object of the true grasping they don't think 'I the truly existent person have attained the result of a stream enterer'. What it does say is that that the practitioner still has the innate true grasping even though being free from the intellectually acquired true grasping.

Once someone has realised emptiness, they no longer have the intellectually acquired true grasping. However there are learner aryas at this stage who still have the innate true grasping.

That completes the outline of sources from Mahayana sutras.

2.2.3.2.2. Commentaries and Hinayana Sutras

Now we come to the second outline in which commentaries and Hinayana sutras are given as sources.

The first quote given to prove that one has to realise the selflessness of phenomena in order to attain liberation is from the *Precious Garland* by Nagarjuna. This is a quote that I want everyone of you to have and to know. This quote is very important, because it is always applicable.

As long as one has grasps at the aggregates;

So long one definitely has grasping at 'I';

If grasping at 'I' exists then karma also;

From that then also birth;

Their three paths are in mutual causation;

Without beginning, end or middle;

The wheel of cyclic existence turns;

Like the wheel of a firebrand;

Because it isn't obtained from self, other

or both and nowhere in the three times;

The grasping at 'I' ceases;

And from that karma and birth.

The first two lines say, 'As long as one grasps at the aggregates, so long one definitely has grasping at "I"'. The person it is talking about here is an arhat. For as long as hearer and self-liberated arhats grasp at truly existent aggregates they also definitely grasp at a truly existent self. Even an arhat will have that grasping, because it is said that if one asserts true existence, then one will not go beyond true grasping.

So even though it seems to say here that one has to realise the selflessness of the aggregates first, in order to realise the selflessness of person, that's not what it is actually saying. That is because the selflessness of person is realised first. Then, having realised the selflessness of

person, by focussing on the aggregates one realises the selflessness of phenomena. So what these two lines are saying is that if it is an arhat who asserts the aggregates to be truly existent then that arhat will not have realised the selflessness of person.

The lines 'If grasping at "I" exists then karma also, then birth etc.' are saying that for as long as one has that self-grasping then the creation of karma also exists. If one creates karma then one will take a further rebirth.

Regarding the intellectually acquired view of true grasping *Illumination* mentions Gyaltsab-Je's commentary on the *Ornament of Clear Realisation*, where it says that, if one investigates whether or not the basis and the path and the result are truly existent, and after that investigation one decides that they are truly existent, then that would mark the generation of the intellectually acquired true grasping, and such a person can't go beyond true grasping.

For as long as such a person accepts or asserts the aggregates to be truly existent, that person won't be able to eliminate the object of the self-grasping at person as being truly existent. A superficial reading of the first two lines might convey the meaning that one can't realise selflessness of person without realising selflessness of phenomena, but it isn't saying that at all.

The fifth line says, 'their three paths are in mutual causation'. The three paths being referred to are the two causal paths that are the afflictions and true grasping, and then karma, and the resultant path of suffering, the entire suffering of birth etc. Those three are referred to here as the three paths.

Then there is the line 'without beginning and or middle', meaning that one cannot say which one came first. It is impossible to say whether the afflictions, karma, or suffering came first, even though there is this sequential generation of the affliction being the root, and through that karma being accumulated, and then the combination of those two creating suffering. However if we look it from a broader point of view there's no definiteness about that sequence and there is no way of saying what actually came first. This is because afflictions are also generated from suffering, and from those afflictions one generates karma. So sometimes the afflictions are the cause and the suffering the result, but at other times the suffering is the cause, the afflictions the result. Then through those karma is created.

So there are various types of combinations possible. It is the same also with our afflictions. Even though there is this sequential generation of ignorance, desire, attachment, actually they are not always sequential. For example sometimes anger acts as the cause for ignorance. So it is very important to reflect upon how there's no beginning, middle, or end, but that it's a continuous cycle.

The last lines say, 'Because it isn't obtained from self, other, or both, and nowhere in the three times the grasping at "I" ceases, and from that karma and rebirth'. There is no generation from self, other or both anywhere in the three times. So by realising the lack of inherent existence of dependent arising then the grasping at 'I' ceases. Once the grasping at 'I' has ceased, then also the generation of karma has ceased, and therefore also birth has ceased. Because it isn't obtained from self, other, and so on, this one can relate to the non-generation of the four extremes, so it is not generated from inherently existent

self, inherently existent other, inherently existent both, and no inherently in the three times. By realising in such a way non-generation, then the grasping 'I' ceases, and through that also karma and birth are stopped.

So now you have understood that meaning of that quote from the *Precious Garland*. It will be printed out and you should keep it well.

Next time we can go onto the quotes from the Hinayana sutras and there is also a further quote from the Precious Garland.

Today we have covered three Mahayana sutra quotes as sources showing that arhats have to realise selflessness of phenomena. They were the *Diamond Cutter Sutra*, the *Sutra of the Miserliness of Superior Meditative Absorption*, and then the Lhabhi sampa dempa sutra *Questions of Adhyashaya*. We had also various quotes from the *Bodhisattva Charyavatara*, also from the *Sixty Reasons* by Nagarjuna and so forth.

We have now more or less completed the Middle Way Gone Far where it deals with this particular topic, showing by the three types of reasoning (which we discussed) as well as through various quotes (which we also went through) that arhats have to realise the selflessness of phenomena. There are a few remaining difficult points to cover, but we should finish the chapter quite quickly.

It's called the Madhyamika Gone Far because the root text reads, 'For those gone far also awareness becomes superior', and as the explanations given here evolve from that line, they are referred to as the Madhyamika Gone Far.

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The Sixteen Aspects of the Four Noble Truths

Truth of Suffering

One is mistaken with regard to the truth of suffering by grasping at purity, happiness, permanence and self. Understanding the four aspects of the truth of suffering, which are impermanence, suffering, empty and selfless, counteracts this.

Take the subject suffering of suffering - it is **impermanent** - because it is generated adventitiously; it is **suffering** - because it is powered by karma and afflictions; it is **empty** - because there is no separate controlling self; it is empty - because it **isn't** established in the nature of a **n independent self**.

Truth of Origin

One is mistaken with regard to the truth of origin by grasping at sufferings to be without cause or to have a discordant cause. Regarding the latter there is the grasping at suffering being produced by only one cause, being produced by a creator the intention of whom preceded the result, and grasping at suffering to be changeable adventitiously but being essentially permanent. Understanding the four aspects of the truth of origin, which are cause, origin, intense generation and condition, counteracts this.

Take the subject contaminated karma and craving - it follows it is the aspect of **cause** - because it is the root of its resultant suffering; it is **origin** - because it generates its resultant suffering entirely again and again; it is **intense generation** - because it generates it strongly; it is the aspect of **condition** - because it is the concurrently acting condition of it's resultant suffering.

Truth of Cessation

One is mistaken with regard to the truth of cessation by grasping at liberation to be non-existent, by grasping at certain contaminated dharmas to be liberation, by grasping at certain sufferings to be supreme liberation, and by thinking that even though one can exhaust the sufferings one could reverse from that state.

Understanding the four aspects of the truth of cessation, which are cessation, peace, supremacy and definite emergence, counteracts those misconceptions.

Take the subject complete freedom from suffering achieved through the power of the antidote - it is the aspect of **cessation** - because it is the freedom having abandoned suffering; it is **peace** - because it is the freedom having abandoned the afflictions; it is **supreme** - because it is liberation with benefit and bliss; it is the aspect of having **definitely emerged** - because it is irreversible liberation.

Truth of the Path

One is mistaken with regard to the truth of the path by thinking that a path to liberation is non-existent, thinking that meditation on selflessness isn't suitable to be the path, holding certain meditative absorptions alone to be the path to liberation and holding a path reversing suffering to be non-existent.

Understanding the four aspects of the noble truth of the path, which are path, suitable, accomplishment and definitely liberating, counteracts those misconceptions.

Take the subject wisdom directly realising selflessness - it is the aspect of **path** - because it is a path progressing towards liberation; it is the aspect of **suitable** - because it is the direct antidote against the afflictions; it is the aspect of **accomplishment** - because it is a transcendental wisdom directly realising mind's final nature; it is the aspect of **definitely liberating** - because it is the antidote irreversibly eliminating the afflictions.

Because I saw faults in the other two translations that have been sent around I wrote this for the use of the Tara Institute study group alone, based on Gyalsab-Je.

Maybe you will find it useful.

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May all be auspicious.