
Study Group - *Madhyamakavatanama*

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Tenzin Dongak

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Generate a virtuous motivation thinking, 'I have to become enlightened for the benefit of all sentient beings, and 'for that purpose I'm now going to listen to this profound teaching. Then I'm going to put it into practice as much as possible'.

3.5.1.2.2. Identifying the Object of Negation According to the Prasangika Point of View

This is done by way of first showing how phenomena are merely labelled by conception, and then grasping at the reverse of that is true grasping.

3.5.1.2.2.1. How Phenomena are Labelled by Conception

The metaphor of the misapprehension of the rope as a snake is used to show how phenomena are merely labelled by conception. Maybe you have had the experience of misapprehending something that wasn't a snake as a snake. There comes a time when, having focussed on the coiled rope that is in colours slightly similar to the colours of a snake, the thought arises within the person's mind, 'That is a snake'. At that time the mind has labelled the rope as 'snake'. But if one looks for it, the snake is not established in any of the parts of the rope, and neither is it present in the collection of the parts of the rope.

Likewise in dependence upon the basis of the five aggregates the thought 'I' arises and one has labelled 'I'. However if one looks at whether the 'I' can be found within any of the parts of the five aggregates, or within the collection of the five aggregates, then it is unfindable. If one thinks about it, the basis of imputation also cannot be found at the time of analysis. That is because it doesn't exist from its own side or inherently.

One important difference between the metaphor and the actual meaning is that even though the 'I' is labelled in dependence upon a basis it is able to perform a function. The snake is also merely labelled on a basis, but the snake is not able to perform any type of function. The snake is non-existent in reality, and so it is not able to perform any type of function on the basis of the rope, while the 'I' is able to perform all kinds of functions on the basis of the five aggregates. So on the basis of the five aggregates then the 'I' performs various types of functions and actually exists. That is the difference.

The 'I' cannot be found in the aggregates, in the collection of the aggregates, separately and so forth, but still conventionally there is the 'I' that is labelled in dependence on the basis of the aggregates, which can also perform various types of functions in dependence on the basis of the aggregates. We all know that the 'I' engages in the various types of actions, and so it is also the basis for accumulating karma and so forth. Apart from this mere 'I' there is no other example of the self. When we say that the mere 'I' is the only example of the self, the 'mere' eliminates any of the aggregates being the 'I'. The 'I' is merely labelled in dependence upon the aggregates, and from the side of the aggregates no 'I' exists in any way there. That's why one says that the 'I' exists in mere name.

3.5.1.2.2.2. Showing How grasping at the Reverse of Merely Labelled by Conception is True Grasping

Two Types of Self-Grasping

Grasping at phenomena as not being posited by the power of the mere label is true grasping. We said that phenomena are actually posited through the mere power of the label, and so grasping at the reverse, grasping at phenomena as not being posited through the power of the mere label or name, is true grasping.

Grasping at phenomena as not being posited through the power of the mere name is innate true grasping, innate grasping at ultimate existence, innate grasping at phenomena to be perfectly established, innate grasping at phenomena being established through their own entity, innate grasping at phenomena being inherently established, innate grasping at phenomena being naturally established, and so forth.

Of those six objects of grasping the first three, true existence, ultimate existence, and perfectly established existence are not accepted by the Svatantrika Madhyamika, but the last three, being established through its own identity, being inherently established, being naturally established are accepted by the Svatantrika Madhyamika.

Similarly to the Svatantrika Madhyamika, the term 'ultimate' is here also applied to the three wisdoms realising emptiness arising through listening, contemplation, and meditation. Also the two ways of positing ultimate existence are the same. The existence of conventional phenomena within the realisation of emptiness by the wisdom realising emptiness is regarded as ultimate existence. So if there was the presence of conventional phenomena within the realisation of emptiness by the wisdom realising emptiness, then that would be one measure of ultimate existence. Grasping at that is **intellectually acquired true grasping**. The second way of positing ultimate existence is the grasping at phenomena as not being posited through the force of name and label. Grasping at that is **innate true grasping**.

Having initially understood how the person is merely labelled in dependence upon the aggregates, then one can also apply that understanding of being merely labelled to other phenomena. Everything that exists is selfless. The self that all phenomena are empty of is existence not coming about through the power of the label. In other words existing from its own side through its uncommon mode of abiding, not being merely labelled by conception. Those two things are the same, and they are the measure of the self that is being refuted.

For example the person not posited through the power of the label would be the self of person. The person's emptiness of not being posited through the force of the label is the selflessness of person.

The object of negation is the same regardless of whether it is negated on the basis of the self, or on the basis of phenomena. In the Prasangika system there is no difference in subtlety between the selflessness of person and the selflessness of phenomena. If the object of negation is negated on the basis of the self, then it is the **selflessness of person**. If existence not coming about through the force of the label is negated on the basis of phenomena then it is the **selflessness of phenomena**. So there is no difference in subtlety between selfless of person and selflessness of phenomena. However because of the difference of the basis, it is said that the selflessness of person is easier to realise than the selflessness of phenomena.

Concerning the object of negation *Illumination* gives a quote from Chandrakirti's commentary on the *Four Hundred Verses on Madhyamika* by Aryadeva. It says:

What is called the self is the nature not depending upon other phenomena.

The absence of that is selflessness.

So what is called the self is the nature of phenomena that

doesn't exist in dependence upon something else, and the absence of that is selflessness.

Then it says:

That selflessness by way of the division of phenomena and person is divided into the selflessness of phenomena and the selflessness of person.

It goes on to say that through the division of phenomena and person then two selflessnesses are explained. These two selflessnesses are not differentiated through the object of negation but they are differentiated by the basis of negation.

We have now completed the two types of self-grasping.

The View of the Transitory Collections

What is the view of the transitory collections? The view of the transitory collections is a particular type of self-grasping. The definition is, ***an afflicted wisdom (discriminative awareness) grasping at the 'I' and 'mine' of one's own continuum to be inherently existing.***

The object of the innate view of the transitory collections needs to be 'I' or 'mine', and the thought 'I' or 'mine' needs to be generated naturally within the awareness. That thought is only generated with regard to oneself, and is not generated with regard to others.

The innate grasping at the person contained within the continuum of others as being inherently existing is innate self-grasping at person, but is not the innate view of the transitory collection. The view of the transitory collection has a twofold division into the view of the transitory collection thinking 'I', and the view of the transitory collection thinking 'mine'. Transitory collection refers to the aggregates.

Of the two views of the transitory collection, grasping at inherent 'I' and grasping at inherent 'mine', the grasping at inherent 'mine' is actually also a grasping at an inherent 'I'.

The view of the transitory collection grasping at 'mine' to inherently exist actually grasps at the mere 'mine' to inherently exist. It doesn't grasp at any of the examples that are 'mine', such as the aggregates, or the various sense powers, like the eye, ears, and so forth to inherently exist. That's not what is meant. What it means is that it grasps at the mere 'mine' to be inherently existing, which is also self-grasping at person because one can't grasp at 'mine' without grasping at 'I'. The word 'I' is expressively contained within the word 'mine'.

As it says here, the view of the transitory collection needs to be a natural thought that thinks 'I', which arises from the depth of one's mind. When we ask, 'What is the 'I'?' it is the object of that naturally arising thought thinking 'I' according to my opinion. The 'I' is the focal object of the naturally arising view of the transitory collections thinking 'I'. Within the mind there is a naturally arising thought that thinks 'I', and the object of that thought is the mere 'I'. It isn't a thought of 'Oh the body is the 'I'', or that various aspects of the mind such as the feelings and so forth are 'I', or that some limb of the body is 'I'. It's just the mere thought thinking 'I', and the object of that thought is the mere 'I'.

Then it goes onto say what was said before, that the view of the transitory collections having focussed on the 'I' and 'mine' of one's own continuum, grasps them as inherently existing. So the view of the transitory collections grasps at the 'I' and 'mine' within one's own continuum to be inherently existing, and it doesn't grasp at the various examples that are 'mine', such as the eyes, ears, aggregates, and so forth to be inherently existent.

It also adds in the definition that it is an afflicted wisdom. If you say that if it is wisdom there is a pervasion that it is virtue, then you have to make the thesis that afflicted wisdom is not wisdom. You can analyse whether or not there could be such a

thing as an afflicted wisdom.

It's important that you get a clear mental image of what grasping at the self of phenomena means, and what the grasping at the self of person means. For there you go to the particular self-grasping at person that it the view of the transitory collection.

If you have a good grasp at those subjects then that is a very good preliminary basis from which one then can understand the rest of the text.

So self-grasping is that which causes one to remain in cyclic existence.

As it says here from the *Seventy Stanzas on Emptiness*:

*Grasping at the functioning phenomena
Generated from causes and conditions to be a perfectly
existing,
Was taught by the Buddha to be ignorance.
From that the dependent twelve links arise.*

The grasping at phenomena to be ultimately established is the ignorance that is the root of cyclic existence. From that the ignorance that is the grasping at the self of person arises, and from that the dependent twelve links arise.

Grasping at the self of phenomena is regarded as the root of cyclic existence because it is like the seed of cyclic existence. From that arises the self-grasping at person, and then from that arise the twelve dependent links. Within the twelve dependent links the first link is the link of ignorance, which refers only to the self-grasping at person. One can't posit self-grasping at phenomena to be an integral part of that first link. The first link is always self-grasping at person.

In order to reverse that ignorance one needs to see that phenomena are empty of the way they are apprehended by that ignorance. Then one sees selflessness - suchness appears to the mind. In order to oppose the ignorance one needs to see that phenomena are empty of the way ignorance apprehends the object.

Ignorance apprehends the object to exist from its own side, to exist inherently. The self-grasping at a person grasps at the person as existing from its own side, not being merely labelled by conception. In order to oppose the ignorance that is the self-grasping at person, one needs to realise that the person is actually empty of the way it is being apprehended by that ignorance, which means that it is empty of existence from its own side. The person is empty of inherent existence not being labelled by conception.

As it says in the *Four Hundred Stanzas*:

*If one sees the selflessness of the object,
The seeds of existence will cease*

Then it gives another quote from another part of the *Four Hundred Stanzas*:

*Therefore by destroying ignorance
One will likewise destroy all afflictions.
Because ignorance is the root of all afflictions,
destroying the root ignorance will also destroy all
afflictions.*

*If one sees the dependent arising
Ignorance won't arise.*

*Because the object of negation is the opposite of
dependent arising, it is independent existence,
existence independent of something else.*

*By seeing dependent arising
Ignorance won't arise.*

*Therefore one should concentrate all one's efforts only
on that
That is my advice.*

So is there a difference in the presentation in the object of negation according to the Svatantrika and according to the Prasangika? Did you see some difference there?

First of all what is the measure of the object of negation according to the Svatantrika?

Student: Existing from its own side through its uncommon mode of abiding, not being posited by an uncontradicted awareness.

What is the measure of the object of negation according to the Prasangika?

Student: Existence from its own side not being merely labelled by conception.

If you think about those two objects of negation what is the difference? Is one subtler than the other? One can say that the difference in subtlety comes about because the Svatantrika assert inherent existence while the Prasangika refute inherent existence. So how does it come that one is subtler than the other?

Student: The Svatantrika say that there is still part of the base, projecting from the mind. The Prasangika say that it is all imputation.

The Svatantrika say that something exists from that side of the basis of imputation. If one thinks about that in conjunction, for example, with the self, the 'I', it does make certain sense to say that the basis upon which the 'I' is labelled exists from its own side. Saying that there is intrinsic existence in the basis on which the 'I' is labelled brings a certain comfort to mind. If one says that not only is the 'I' merely labelled on the basis, but also that the basis is merely labelled then that makes it subtler. Then the understanding becomes more refined and it is more difficult to arrive at that understanding. How something can be labelled on a basis that is also itself merely labelled?

Its very important then to reflect upon the difference between those two points of view, trying to understand the Svatantrika point of view, what the meaning of uncontradicted awareness is, what it means to be posited by an uncontradicted awareness and then trying to understand the difference between the points of view of the Svatantrika and the Prasangika.

Having identified the object of negation we then have the grasping at the object of negation. So how do the Svatantrika identify that grasping and how do the Prasangika identify that grasping at the object of negation?

In general of course you have true existence and both intellectually acquired grasping as well as innate grasping, but that's not what I mean here. The Svatantrika classify the grasping at true existence as self-grasping at phenomena, while for the Prasangika grasping at true existence can be either self-grasping at person or self-grasping at phenomena depending on the focal object. For the Svatantrika, having already previously identified the grasping at the person as being a self-sufficient substantially-existent as self-grasping at person, the grasping at true existence is self-grasping at phenomena. That shouldn't be confused.

According to the Svatantrika there is a difference in subtlety between the self-grasping at person and self-grasping at phenomena, and in the Prasangika system there is no difference in subtlety.

We have identified the object of negation according to the Prasangika. What do the Prasangika call the grasping?

Student: View of the transitory collections

First of all the grasping is self-grasping. So then how many self-grasplings are there?

We have the two types of grasping, self-grasping at phenomena and self-grasping at person, and correspondingly we have the two types of selflessness, the selflessness of person and selflessness of phenomenon. What is the difference between the

self-grasping at person and the view of the transitory collection?

Student: Self-grasping can also refer to the grasping at person that is not one's own continuum, whereas the view of the transitory collections refers specifically to the 'I' in one's own continuum.

Is there a self-grasping at a person that takes for example the eye or the ear as its object?

Student: No, because the mere mind that is the observer of 'mine' is not the observer of the eye.

Very good. So do we also have the intellectually acquired self-grasping and the innate self-grasping?

Student: Intellectually acquired self-grasping is abandoned on the path of seeing.

Are you sure? What does it mean to be an intellectually acquired true grasping? The innate self-grasping is the self-grasping that arises naturally within the mental continuum. When we talk about intellectually acquired true grasping, how is it intellectually acquired?

Student: Through adherence to tenets.

This term *tenzin kuntak* that is translated as 'intellectually acquired true grasping' literally means the totally imputed self-grasping. (Here for this debate maybe we can say intellectually generated self-grasping¹.) If it is true grasping that is intellectually generated by a tenet then is there a pervasion that it is intellectually generated true grasping?

If there's no pervasion then give an example where there's no pervasion. Give an example of something that is intellectually generated by a tenet, but which is not an intellectually generated true grasping.

What about the subject 'the grasping at the person to be a self-sufficient substantially-existent'? The grasping at the person to be a self-sufficient substantially-existent is classified by the lower tenets as self-grasping. In a way it is intellectually generated as self-grasping by the lower tenets. However it is not an actual intellectually generated self-grasping because there is also an innate grasping at the person as being a self-sufficient substantially-existent. So if it is intellectually generated as self-grasping by a lower tenet then there's no pervasion that it is an intellectually generated self-grasping. Take the subject grasping at the person being a self-sufficient substantially-existent, it is intellectually generated as self-grasping by the lower tenet, but it is not an intellectually acquired or generated self-grasping.

What is the ignorance that is the root of cyclic existence?

Student: The initial ignorance that is the root of cyclic existence is the self-grasping at phenomena.

The sequence of the self-grasplings that are generated is that initially the self-grasping at phenomena is generated, and then only subsequently self-grasping at the person. When the selflessnesses are realised they are reversed, and the selflessness of person is easier to realise than the selflessness of phenomena. The sequence of generation of the self-grasplings is that first the self-grasping at phenomena is generated, and that is the root of cyclic existence, and then subsequently the self-grasping at person is generated.

If you think about it, the 'I' cannot appear to the mind without the aggregates first appearing to the mind. So the appearance of the 'I' or the self to the mind will always initially depend on the aggregates first appearing to the mind. The 'I' cannot appear to the mind without the aggregates appearing to the mind first. Therefore when the aggregates initially appear to the mind one grasps at those aggregates to exist truly, and that is the self-

¹ This debate seems to deal more with Tibetan semantics that fall away in the English translation.

grasping at phenomena that is initially generated. Subsequently the 'I' appears to the mind, and then one grasps at the 'I' to be inherently existing, and that is the self-grasping at person, which is has been generated second.

So did you understand that a little bit?

It is my understanding that because the aggregates appear first to the mind and the 'I' appears subsequently, that the grasping at the aggregates to exist truly is also generated first, and the grasping at the 'I' to exist truly is generated second. Of course one has to relate this to one's own aggregates and 'I', and one doesn't relate it to the grasping at another person's aggregates and 'I'. Of course for another person to appear to our mind the aggregates of that person also have to appear to our mind initially. Then in dependence upon that appearance of the aggregates the other person appears to our mind. Here one has to really relate the sequence to one's own aggregates and self.

One has to understand very well that the two self-grasplings are generated subsequent to one another. Initially the self-grasping at phenomena is generated, and then the self-grasping at person is generated, and there is no difference in subtlety between the two self-grasplings. It is easier to realise the selflessness of person than it is to realise the selflessness of phenomena. There is no difference in subtlety between the two types of selflessness, and the selflessness of person is easier to realise than the selflessness of phenomena.

That's very important, and so one has to contemplate it. Thinking about it will be very beneficial for one's mind.

Review

Who is the author of the *Introduction to the Middle Way, the Entering the Middle Way*.

Students: Chandrakirti.

Out of the two categories, words of the Buddha or commentary, which one is *Entering the Middle Way*?

Student: Commentary.

Into which of the three baskets of teachings does *Entering the Middle Way* fall?

Student: Abhidharma.

Why does it belong to the Abhidharma basket?

Student: Because the subject is wisdom.

The term basket is used here because a basket is a vessel of various things. The things that are the different teachings of the Buddha are contained within one particular vessel. So one can talk about a basket. When we talk about a basket of the inner teachings, then we talk about the basket of the teachings that oppose the root of cyclic existence - self-grasping. Here 'inner' refers to inner consciousness, so the teachings that oppose self-grasping are called the basket of the inner teachings.

This text *Entering the Middle Way* belongs to the Abhidharma basket. The central teaching is emptiness, but then that is surrounded by teachings on the whole path to enlightenment. Here we have the three dharmas of ordinary individuals, the ten bodhisattva grounds, the ten perfections, the union of calm abiding and special insight, the resultant buddha ground and so forth. So one shouldn't think that it is an empty vessel, as there are quite a few things in it.

Maybe the study group could join the debating class on Sunday. There you could debate what we have discussed over the last four Tuesdays. What do you think of that? I think it is very beneficial to debate those topics.

Next week is discussion group. Try to discuss properly and don't be timid or self-doubting, thinking, 'Oh my question is too stupid or not profound enough', or 'My answer is too stupid or not profound enough'. Don't be timid like that.

In the monastery when the monks debate there are those who

always sit very quietly and timidly, and never say anything'. They don't generate any wisdom, and they don't get anywhere. Those who get up and debate whatever comes into their mind become very knowledgeable over time, even though its not one hundred percent accurate initially. At the beginner's stage one should be very argumentative and give many 'no pervasions' and 'reason not established'. Of course when the monks become more senior then it's more appropriate to be less argumentative, but at the beginning it is actually the beneficial thing to do.

If one is always very forthright saying what one thinks, then one generates new insights and wisdom because two viewpoints collide, and then from that new insights are generated.

One can quite often find that those monks who just sit there and listen and never get up to debate will find that when they have to get up, at examination time they don't know how to debate. What they say will also be different from the Geshes, and they will clap their hands when they don't say anything, or then they will say things and 'not clap their hands, or they will first clap their hands and after stamp their feet.

When you are clapping your hands you shouldn't be just waving your hands around meaninglessly. The gesture with the left hand means closing the door to the three lower realms, and with the gesture with the right hands one should meditate on pulling sentient beings out from the lower realms into the higher realms. One should do those gestures with those intentions.

The objective of debating is to oppose ignorance and we have to refute that ignorance.

Transcribed from tape by Mark Emerson

Edit 1 by Adair Bunnett

Edit 2 by Venerable Tenzin Dongak

Edited Version

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