
Study Group - *Madhyamakavataranama*

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དབུ་མ་ལ་འཇུག་པ་ཞེས་བྱ་བ་བཞུགས་པོ།

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Please generate the motivation of bodhicitta thinking, 'I have to attain complete enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings. Therefore I'm now going to listen to this profound teaching and then put it into practice for that purpose.'

3.5.1.1.1.2.2.2.3. It is appropriate to follow Nagarjuna

Showing Through Logic

If one wants to attain liberation one has to follow Nagarjuna's system only, and not follow any other system. The reason is because if one follows the Mind Only system then one has the assertion of an inherently existing other-powered phenomena, the inherently existing consciousness, that lacks an external object. By following that assertion one transgresses from the two truths: by asserting an inherently existent consciousness one asserts an ultimately existing consciousness, and by negating external existence one transgresses conventional existence. In such a way one has fallen from the two truths and cannot attain liberation.

The root text reads,

For those falling outside of Venerable Acharya Nagarjuna's path the method for peace does not exist. They lapse from illusory¹ and suchness truth, And can't attain liberation because of that lapse. Nominal truth becomes the method and Ultimate truth becomes that arising from method. Not knowing the distinction between the two in any way They are on the wrong path due to distorted ideas.

Mirror:

Take the subject '*those falling outside of Venerable Acharya Nagarjuna's path*', they don't have *the main method* for attaining peaceful nirvana - because they have *lapsed from illusory and suchness*, or ultimate *truth*, and as long as one strays from the two truths and doesn't persist one *can't attain liberation*. That is because realisation of *nominal truth becomes the method*, and realisation of *ultimate truth becomes that arising from method*, and whoever doesn't know *the distinction between these two truths in any way is on the wrong path due to distorted ideas*.

The Madhyamika and the Mind Only differ in the way they look at the basis, path, and result. From the Madhyamika point of view basis, path, and result have to lack inherent existence, while from the Mind Only point of view basis, path, and result can only function on the basis of true existence. Therefore the Mind Only lack the

main method for attaining liberation. What is the main method for attaining liberation? The three principles of the path are the main method for attaining liberation, and one of those principles is the correct wisdom understanding selflessness². So the Mind Only have strayed from that wisdom and therefore don't have the main method for attaining liberation, or peaceful nirvana.

Because the Mind Only have strayed from an undistorted perception of the two truths, they have strayed from an undistorted understanding of the two truths, therefore they cannot attain liberation. Why? Because since they have strayed from the conventional illusory truth they have strayed from the nominal presentation of existence, which is the method through which one can realise ultimate truth, through which one can subsequently attain liberation. Therefore because the nominal conventional truth becomes the method through which one then can realise ultimate truth, they don't have the method for realising ultimate truth. They can't attain liberation if they stray from that nominal presentation of conventional illusory existence.

Because of not knowing the distinction between these two truths in any way, the Mind Only are on the wrong path due to distorted ideas. As long as they persist in this wrong path, and as long as they follow their distorted ideas, they are only on the path to further cyclic existence, or samsara and not liberation. So if one wants to change from the samsaric path to the path to liberation one needs to get to know the two truths very well.

This shows through logic that if one transgresses from the two truths, for example as the Mind Only do, then one is unable to attain liberation.

Showing Through Scripture

The Concentration That Shows the Ascertainment of Suchness Sutra says,

'The Comprehender of the World (one of the titles of the Buddha) showed the two truths by relying on his own realisation without having listened to or relied upon others. Whatever is illusory, meaning conventional, is likewise ultimate, and there is no need for a third truth.'

It also states in the *Root Wisdom* by Nagarjuna,

'Without reliance upon the nominal there is no understanding of the ultimate. Without understanding the ultimate there is no attainment of liberation.'

So it says the same thing.

You can see that understanding the two truths is incredibly significant. We have been over the presentation of basis, path, and result many times before. It is something that really one really shouldn't forget: the basis being the two truths, the path being method and wisdom, and the result being the two or four bodies of the buddha.

As we already mentioned before, it is also incredibly important to understand the distinction between not existing inherently and not existing at all, and the

¹ Used here for conventional since it is closer to the actual Tibetan word.

² The other two are renunciation and bodhicitta

distinction between inherent existence and existence.

What do we mean when we say that something is non-existent?

Students: It doesn't exist at all.

Yes but what is the meaning? You can't just say, 'Oh non-existent means it doesn't exist'. You have to give some kind of reason. For example we say that the mule's foal doesn't exist. What is the reason we give?

Without getting lost in space, the way of approaching it is beginning with the definition of existence. The definition of existence is being the focus, or object of valid cognition. That's how we define whether or not something exists. If something is the object of valid cognition then it is an existent. If it is not the object of valid cognition then it is a non-existent. From our own understanding we should be able to say that is how we define that something exists - if something can be the object of valid cognition then it is an existent, and if something cannot be the object of valid cognition then it is a non-existent.

Existent, established base, object of knowledge are synonyms. When we talk about an established base, how and by what is it established? We refer to a base that has been established through valid cognition. If something is established through valid cognition then it is an established base, it is an existent. Likewise, why do we refer to something as an object of knowledge? Because it is something that is suitable to become an object of awareness, that can be comprehended by awareness because it is an object of comprehension. That's why we refer to it as an object of knowledge.

If we take the example of a vase, is the vase an existent or not?

Students: Yes

What is the reason for that?

Student: I have a valid cognition of it.

The vase exists because it is an object of comprehension by the eye-consciousness, which is the main object-potential of the vase. Then we go on and ask, 'Is vase inherently existent?'

Student: No.

Because the vase exists therefore it is not a non-existent. One cancels the other out. But the vase lacks inherent existence, so it is non-inherently existent. So it is not a non-existent, but it is a non-inherently existent.

Do you agree with that? Is the vase a non-inherently existent?

Student answer: Yes.

So the lack of inherently existing vase is the emptiness of the vase. Do you agree?

Student answer: Yes.

If it is the lack of inherently existing vase, is it necessarily the emptiness of the vase?

Student: Yes.

Wouldn't you say that if it exists there is a pervasion that it is the lack of inherently existing vase?'

For example, the vase itself lacks inherent existence. But is the vase the emptiness of the vase? No. The vase is empty of inherent existence, but the vase is not the vase's emptiness. Sometimes we tend to think that the vase itself is its own emptiness because it lacks inherent existence. The vase is the lack of inherently existing vase, but that doesn't mean that the vase is necessarily the vase's emptiness.

Just because something is the lack of truly existent vase doesn't mean that it is the vase's emptiness, just like we say that everything that exists lacks true existence.

The vase's existence is established by a nominal valid cognition, but the inherently existent vase is not existent. Why? Because it is not the object of valid cognition, it cannot be found with any type of valid cognition. If one doesn't understand this distinction between existence and inherent existence, and non-existence and a lack of inherent existence, then of course one can start to wonder, 'What is it then that that takes rebirth'. If one is not clear about this distinction between non-inherent existence and a non-existence, then when one meditates on a lack of inherent existence, one starts to wonder, 'Oh, then what is possibly left that could then take rebirth', and one arrives then at a nihilistic point of view. That is because one is not very clear about this distinction between a lack of inherent existence and complete non-existence.

3.5.1.1.2.2.2.4. Showing that refuting other-powered phenomena and worldly convention isn't the same

The **Mind Only** say to the **Prasangika**, 'Your refutation of other-powered phenomena and worldly convention is synonymous. By refuting other-powered phenomena you also refute worldly convention'. The **Prasangika** reply saying that refuting other-powered phenomena does not equal refuting worldly convention.

Here we have these three verses,

*I don't accept the illusory³ the way
You posit other-powered phenomena.*

*Saying for effect that they exist even though they
don't,*

Was done for the mind of worldly beings, I state.

First the **Mind Only** say to the **Prasangika**, 'Refuting inherently existing other-powered phenomena equals refuting worldly convention.'

The **Prasangika** reply,

*'This isn't the same at all because I don't accept the
illusory the way you, the Mind Only posit inherently
existing other-powered phenomena. (Mirror)*

Earlier the **Prasangika** said to the **Mind Only**, 'We do not accept inherently existent other-powered phenomena ultimately. Not only do we refute them on the basis of the ultimate truth, but we don't even accept them as existing in an illusory conventional way. We refute them completely and we don't accept them in any way'.

Then the **Mind Only** come back at the **Prasangika** and ask quite cleverly, 'Well, don't you accept inherent existence from time to time? Aren't there certain cases when you do accept inherent existence?' Then the

³ Conventional

Prasangika reply that those statements about forms and so forth existing inherently, even though they don't, was only done for the effect of worldly beings realising suchness. Sometimes with the long view in mind of ultimately being able to lead confused worldly beings to an understanding of emptiness, then one agrees with the distorted views of those worldly beings at a particular point in time. This is in order to be able to later lead them from their distorted views to a correct understanding of suchness.

The Prasangika say that illusory conventional truth is always distorted and never accurate. However according to **worldly perception** there is the division into distorted illusory conventional truth and accurate illusory conventional truth. Similarly, these statements about forms and so forth existing inherently were made only according to worldly perception and are not correct in actuality.

The Buddha stated on different occasions that there is inherent existence. These statements have to be understood as statements that were made for the perception of the students. They were not definitive statements. The Buddha taught certain things according to the perception of certain disciples, but that doesn't mean that those statements definitive.

Then the **Mind Only** say to the Prasangika, 'Well if you don't accept inherently existing illusory conventional truth, what type of illusory conventional truth do you accept?'

Here the **Prasangika** reply, 'I accept illusory conventional illusory reality that exists relative to worldly convention'. Conventional illusory reality exists in dependence upon worldly convention. However independently from worldly convention, illusory conventional reality is non-existent.

*If non-existent for worldly beings, like
Not existing for an arhat who, having abandoned
The aggregates abides in peace, then accordingly
I wouldn't say 'They exist because of the world'.*

I already mentioned before that we have nirvana with remainder, and nirvana without remainder, and we have an arhat that abides within the nirvana with remainder and arhat abiding within the nirvana without remainder. The different tenets have different interpretations of what remainder means. According to the **Mind Only and Svatantrika** the remainder refers to the remainder of the contaminated aggregates, and therefore nirvana with remainder is attained first, and subsequently nirvana without remainder is attained. According to the **Prasangika** the remainder refers to the remainder of true appearance, and so nirvana without remainder is initially attained, and nirvana with remainder is attained subsequently.

According to the **Mind Only Following Scripture**, nirvana without remainder refers to a state without the any contaminated aggregates. When arhats enter the nirvana without remainder after death they go into a pure mental state.

If forms etc. were non-existent for worldly beings like they do not exist for the perception of an arhat who abides in the sphere of peace after having abandoned

the aggregates, then I wouldn't say 'They exist in dependence upon worldly perception'.

For the **Mind Only** the negation of inherent other-powered phenomena equals the negation of illusory conventional existence. Then the **Prasangika** say, 'Well according to my point of view conventional illusory existence comes about in dependence upon worldly convention. But if you don't accept that then I would say that according to you the need to train in the path for many many eons on end becomes unnecessary. If you don't accept the presentation of conventional illusory existence arising in dependence upon or relative to worldly convention, then I would say that the need to train in the path for eons and eons becomes irrelevant'. We can relate this dispute about conventional illusory existence to external existence. The **Mind Only** refute external existence, while the **Prasangika** say external existence is a conventional phenomenon.

*In case you aren't contradicted by the world
You should refute this relative only to the world.
At this point you and the world shall debate and
Subsequently I will rely on the one with strength.*

Here again the subject is external existence. The **Prasangika** say to the Mind Only, 'If your assertion of the lack of external existence is in concordance with worldly convention then you shouldn't debate with us but with worldly convention, and then we will see who is right. You should just debate with worldly convention and then I will just rely on the one who comes out the stronger, which is worldly convention'.

Student Question: So we say that we don't accept the Mind Only system because it doesn't follow convention?

It is OK to accept the Mind Only tenet, which is a valid tenet. There are many great beings who accepted the Mind Only tenet e.g. Dharmakirti or Vasubandhu. Mind Only is a tenet suitable to be followed.

That we have these different Buddhist views shows the greatness of the Buddha's teachings, because it shows that he could teach according to the level, or state of mind, of his followers. For example we are all Mahayanists, but there are millions of beings who follow the Hinayana path through the kindness of the Buddha.

These different tenets need to be meditated upon, moving from one to the next, comparing one tenet to the next highest, rejecting the lower one and moving on to the next one, and in this way, following a 'graduated path of emptiness', one arrives at an understanding of the final Prasangika view. We are presented from the beginning with the highest view, but that doesn't mean the lower views are worthless.

People ask, 'Why bother? Why not go to the final point of view first?' The Buddha taught different views to different disciples. For some a self-knower is reassuring and it would be detrimental for them not to learn about a self-knower. First these people accept a self-knower and then through their development they come to reject it because of its inherent existence. So they come to realise that inherent existence is non-existent.

This richness of views showing different stages shows the greatness of the Buddha. Atisha said that teaching

individuals without clairvoyance is like a bird trying to fly without two wings. Having different types of tenets really shows the greatness of the teachings.

Further, through his kindness the Buddha might say one thing but his disciples heard what he said according to their own disposition

The Buddha turned the wheel of Dharma on three occasions. The cycle of teachings belonging to the first turning was according to the Vaibashika and Sautrantika view, the cycle of teachings belonging to the second turning shows primarily the Madhyamakas view, and the third turning shows the Mind Only view, i.e. mental fiction lacking true existence and other-powered phenomena and thoroughly established phenomena existing truly.

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Edited Version

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