

---

## Study Group - *Madhyamakavataranama*

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Tenzin Dongak

། དབུ་མ་ལ་འཇུག་པ་ཞེས་བྱ་བ་བཞུགས་པོ། །

18 May 2004

---

Generate your motivation well thinking, 'I have to attain enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings, so I have to attain enlightenment and for that purpose I am going to listen to this profound teaching. Then I am going to put it into practice as much as possible'.

### 3.5.1.2.1. Showing That Those Wishing for Liberation Initially Need to Refute the Self as Being Inherently Established (cont.)

This heading is very important to contemplate because it explains the way one is induced into, and kept in, cyclic existence. This is a very important point to consider, because it helps one to generate a stable renunciation. Sometimes when we meditate on renunciation, we only think about the obvious great sufferings and the obvious great adverse conditions that we encounter. The renunciation that we generate through that is not really all that stable. If we look into the situation at greater depth, relating it back to the original source of self-grasping, then we understand that this self-grasping that apprehends reality in a distorted manner can be overcome with an antidote, and then our renunciation will be much more profound and stable.

We can also remember this point when we are in a situation where mental afflictions arise very strongly and we start to doubt our practice. Despite having worked on one's mind for a long time, all at once strong mental afflictions can arise again within the mind. At such a time it is good to relate that to the root of self-grasping, and to remember that the reason one is experiencing this strong upwelling of mental afflictions is because one has not overcome the root of self-grasping. One is experiencing these problems because one has not decided to view self-grasping as the enemy and has not overcome it with an antidote. Relating this experience of strong mental afflictions back to the root of self-grasping in such a manner will be beneficial, and one will not lose one's courage and strength of mind.

Even just doubting whether emptiness is the nature of reality shakes the foundations of cyclic existence. Even for somebody who has not got a lot of merits, and who merely generates some doubt regarding the empty nature of cyclic existence, that doubt will shake the foundations of cyclic existence. If someone actually generates an understanding of emptiness, not necessarily a realisation, then that is much more effective. So one should definitely generate some understanding, if not a realisation, of what emptiness means. Those practitioners who are of sharp faculty will base all their other practices on their understanding of emptiness - they will base their practice of refuge, their practice of bodhicitta and so forth on that

understanding.

The distorted mind, the self, appears to be totally independent and existing from its own side. If one is able to comprehend that the self doesn't exist in such a way, and generate some understanding of emptiness then that will calm down the mental afflictions. When one comes to understand that the self does not exist totally independently, out of itself, then that will pacify afflictions.

### What is true grasping?

True-grasping is *an awareness that grasps at its object as truly existent*.

True-grasping has the two-fold division into a) the self-grasping at person and b) the self-grasping at phenomena.

a) Self-grasping at a person is *an awareness that grasps at true existence upon having focussed on the object of the self*. Self-grasping at person has a further two-fold division into intellectually acquired and innate self-grasping.

1. **Innate self-grasping at person** is with us from birth. It is the self-grasping at person that arises naturally within one's mental continuum and has been with us since beginningless time. The root of cyclic existence is the innate self-grasping at person.

2. **Intellectually acquired self-grasping at person** is a self-grasping at person that is intellectually acquired through the study of certain tenets that propound such a self.

b) Self-grasping at phenomena is *an awareness that having focussed on phenomena as differentiated from person, then grasps at its object as inherently existent*. Here we also have a two-fold division into intellectually acquired and innate self-grasping at phenomena.

Last time we said that the transitory view is the root of all sufferings. The transitory view is a type of self-grasping at person. Now we have to look the difference between the transitory view and self-grasping at person. The grasping at the 'I' contained within one's own continuum as inherently existent, is an example for both transitory view as well as self-grasping at person. The grasping at the 'I' contained within another person's continuum as inherently existent is an example for a type of grasping that is only self-grasping at person, but not a transitory view.

### The Transitory View

If it is the transitory view there is a pervasion that it is self-grasping at person. However, if it is self-grasping at person, there is no pervasion that it is a view of the transitory collections. The definition of the view of the transitory collections, in short the transitory view, is *an afflicted wisdom that, having focussed on the 'I' or 'mine' within one's own continuum, then grasps at the 'I' as inherently existent*.

In his *Self Commentary* Chandrakirti identifies the transitory view as an afflicted wisdom grasping at the 'I' and 'mine' of one's own continuum as inherently existent. This brings up a point of debate. First of all, by

---

identifying the view of the transitory collections as afflicted wisdom, Chandrakirti has eliminated primary consciousness as a transitory view. This means that if it is a transitory view then it has to be a mental factor. A primary consciousness that grasps at an inherently existent 'I' and 'mine' couldn't be a transitory view. For it to be a transitory view, it has to be an afflicted wisdom, so it has to be a mental factor.

There are two views regarding afflicted wisdom. One view is that if it is wisdom it has to be a mind that is concordant with reality and an afflicted wisdom is not concordant with reality, so therefore it cannot be wisdom. The other view is that one simply says if it is wisdom, it doesn't have to be concordant with reality and one can give as an example the transitory view. So there is a point that is debated, You can analyse for yourself what you think the correct view is.

One definitely has to say if it is a transitory view, it has to be an afflicted wisdom. These notions of 'I' and 'mine' are specifically of an inherently existent 'I' and 'mine', thinking that there is an inherently existent 'I' from its own side, and that there is a 'mine' from its own side. These notions of 'I' from its own side and 'mine' from its own side are the two primary causes of all problems and sufferings.

If one investigates the source of all the problems in the world, they specifically come from the thoughts of an inherently existent 'I' and an inherently existent 'mine'. Because of grasping very strongly at an intrinsic 'I' and an intrinsic 'mine', then fights start, and one ends up with a bleeding head. The cause for the wounds and cuts on one's head is a very strong notion of an intrinsic 'I' and an intrinsic 'mine'.

The transitory view apprehends the intrinsic 'I' and intrinsic 'mine', and therefore it starts this psychological chain reaction of desire and anger, being attached to what makes 'I' happy, and becoming angry at what bothers that 'I' and makes it unhappy. By being aware that this transitory view grasps at an object that is actually non-existent, that it misapprehends reality, that the objects that it apprehends - the inherently existent 'I' and the inherently existent 'mine' - do not actually exist, then one lessens this very strong grasping at intrinsic 'I' and 'mine'. So basically what one is doing is reflecting on the nature of emptiness, through which one then lessens the very strong grasping.

The **focal object** of the transitory view is the 'I' and the **aspect** of the transitory view is inherently existent 'I', and we can relate this to the two lines of verse 6.120 of the root text where it says,

*And having realised the self to be its object,  
Yogis strive to negate the self.*

'Having realised the self to be its object', refers to the self that is the focal object of the transitory view, which is the mere 'I' that exists. Then having focused on the mere 'I', the transitory view arises in the aspect of an inherently existent 'I', which is the non-existent 'I'. If you ask, 'Does the 'I' exist?' the answer is 'Yes'. Does it exist inherently? The answer is 'No'. That's why yogis try to negate the inherently existent self that is apprehended by the transitory view. So the transitory view arises in the aspect

of an inherently existent self, and an inherently existent self is apprehended. Does that inherently existing self exist? No. So one has to negate the inherently existent self, and by negating an inherently existent self one arrives at the absence of that self, which is emptiness.

We have said that the view of the transitory collections, grasping at an inherently existing 'I' and 'mine', is self-grasping at person. Now comes another point of doubt. We said that if it is a transitory view, it has to be self-grasping at person, so the transitory view grasping at an inherently existent 'mine' is self-grasping at person. Does this mean that 'mine' is the 'I'. We said that what makes a grasping a self-grasping at person is self-grasping at person. What makes a grasping a self-grasping at phenomena is when it is a grasping at the inherent existence of a phenomenon as distinguished from person.

This is important because 'mine' is not the person, 'mine' is a phenomenon. But is it a phenomenon that is distinguished from person? No. That's why when one grasps at it as inherently existent, even though it is a phenomenon it doesn't become self-grasping at a phenomenon, because it is not a phenomena that is distinguished from person. It is a phenomenon but not a phenomenon distinguished from person.

Why does grasping at the inherent existence of 'mine' become self-grasping at person? It is because the word 'mine' directly expresses 'I'. When 'mine' is expressed 'I' is expressed, so by grasping at 'mine', one grasps at 'I'. Here, when one talks about 'mine', one shouldn't confuse 'mine' with that which is mine. When it says that the view of the transitory collections grasps that inherently existent 'mine' that doesn't mean that it grasps at that which is mine as inherently existent. It says that it grasps at 'mine' as inherently existent. That is an important difference, because the view of the transitory collections doesn't grasp at the things, such as the eyes, faculties and so forth that are mine, as inherently existent, but it only grasps at 'mine' as inherently existent. The word 'mine' doesn't express any of the examples that are mine, but it only expresses mere 'mine', and within the expression of mere 'mine', 'I' is expressed;. Therefore by grasping at 'mine', one also grasps at 'I'. So by grasping at an inherently existent 'mine', one also grasps at an inherently existent 'I'.

### **3.5.1.2.2. The Way of Refuting That 'I' and 'Mine' Are Inherently Established**

This is divided into two parts.

3.5.1.2.2.1. Refuting an inherently existent 'I'

3.5.1.2.2.2. Refuting inherently existent 'mine'

#### **3.5.1.2.2.1. Refuting that the Self is Inherently Established**

This has six sub-headings.

3.5.1.2.2.1.1. Refuting a self that is of different nature from the aggregates as mentally fabricated by non-Buddhist schools

3.5.1.2.2.1.2. Refuting the notion of some Buddhists that the aggregates are the self

3.5.1.2.2.1.3. Refuting the remaining three, basis and dependent and so forth

3.5.1.2.2.1.4. Refuting a person that is a substantial existent and that can't be described as being that itself or other

3.5.1.2.2.1.5. Presentation of how the self is merely labelled in dependence upon the aggregates, together with an example

3.5.1.2.2.1.6. The self being posited in such a way has the quality of easily abandoning extreme ideas

### **3.5.1.2.2.1.1. Refuting a Self That Is of Different Nature from the Aggregates, as Mentally Fabricated by Non-Buddhist Schools**

#### **3.5.1.2.2.1.1.1. Expressing the Position of the Opponents**

The 'I' has been identified as the focal object of the transitory view as stated in the line 'and having realised the self to be it's object'. So the self has been identified as the object of self-grasping. Now the text goes into the different ways the self is misapprehended. First it goes into the ways non-Buddhist schools misapprehend the self, and then, of course, it refutes those mistaken notions.

Here we first state the Samkya position regarding the self, and then the Vaisheshika position regarding the self.

#### **3.5.1.2.2.1.1.1.1. Expressing the Samkya<sup>1</sup> Position**

The root text says,

*An engaging self, a permanent phenomenon that isn't the creator,  
Lacking qualities and action, is fabricated by the heathen.*

The Samkyas have this notion of a self that has five qualities - it is engaging, it is permanent, it isn't the creator, it lacks qualities and action.

1. They say that the self is engaging because when the self is in cyclic existence then it is engaging happiness and suffering.

2. It is a permanent phenomenon. According to the Samkyas, in the process of attaining liberation everything absorbs into the universal principle. When the practitioners are able to absorb everything into the universal principle, then the only thing that is left is this self-sufficient self that is permanently abiding, and that's why they say the self is permanent.

3. They say that the self isn't the creator. What this means is that it isn't the creator of effects, which they refer to as expressions.

4. The self lacks qualities. The qualities it refers to here are the qualities of particles, darkness and heartstrength. They relate those three qualities to suffering, ignorance and happiness respectively. They say the self lacks those three qualities of suffering, ignorance and happiness.

5. The self also lacks action. What they mean is that since the self pervades everything the self is not the agent for the coming and going of phenomena, the coming and going of existence and so forth. Why? Because the self is all-pervading.

We can find this Samkya view described in the text called *Precious Garland of Tenets*<sup>2</sup>. There it explains the Samkya view of how one can obtain liberation by following the sequence of the twenty-five objects of knowledge. Please read that up, then we don't have to go through it here, which would take quite a long time. The Samkyas propound a self that is of a different nature from the aggregates, and they say that it possesses the five features listed above. In Buddhism, no self of a different nature from the aggregates is posited.

#### **3.5.1.2.2.1.1.1.2. Expressing the Vaisheshika<sup>3</sup> position**

The Vaisheshika position is not greatly different from the Samkya position, which is why the root text says,

*In dependence upon small small differences  
The heathens split into different schools.*

The Vaisheshikas say the self is an engaging permanent phenomenon, the creator, endowed with qualities and lacks action. So they agree with the Samkyas that the self is engaging, and they also agree with the self being a permanent phenomenon. However they disagree with regard to the points of creator and quality. The Vaisheshikas say that the self is a creator and the self is endowed with qualities.

Of course we could just express those two non-Buddhist views and leave it there, but Chandrakirti doesn't just leave it there. He refutes those views.

#### **3.5.1.2.2.1.1.2. The refutation**

The root text says,

*Because of being separated from generation, like a mule's foal,  
Such a self does not exist, and  
It is unsuited to be the basis of 'I'-grasping.  
It also isn't asserted to exist in an illusory manner.*

*Whatever its features, all of them,  
Shown by the heathen in treatise upon treatise  
Are contradicted by their own reason of non-generation.*

*Therefore all those features do not exist.*

*Therefore no self exists apart from the aggregates,  
Because without aggregates its apprehension is not established.*

*It also isn't posited as the basis of worldly beings 'I'-grasping-*

*Awareness, because one views the self even without knowing.*

*Whoever, staying as an animal for many aeons  
Even they don't see this non-generated permanent.  
One can also see the hold of 'I'-grasping over them.*

*Then, there is absolutely no self apart from the aggregates.*

We can leave it here for tonight.

## **Review**

Why should someone who wants to attain liberation first

<sup>1</sup> Enumerators

<sup>2</sup> See *Cutting Through Appearances* by Geshe Llundup Sopa and Jeffrey Hopkins, pp. 158-165.

<sup>3</sup> Particularists

engage in refuting self-grasping?

*Student: It's because self-grasping is the root of cyclic existence.*

Why is self-grasping of person the root of cyclic existence?

*Student: Because it generates the basis for the mental afflictions.*

But the aggregates also form the basis for the mental afflictions, that's why they are called the contaminated aggregates.

*Student: The contaminated aggregates are contaminated as the result of previous ignorance.*

Then also the self itself is the basis for the mental afflictions, because it is the basis for the 'I'-grasping for the self-grasping. So it's the source of the root of cyclic existence.

Why do those seeking liberation have to understand the selflessness of person first?

*Student: In order to generate renunciation.*

*Student: It is easier to realise the selflessness of person than the selflessness of phenomena.*

We are asking why someone who is striving for liberation has to initially comprehend the selflessness of person. Where do those two meet? Why is it so significant that someone who wants to attain liberation has to initially comprehend the selflessness of a person. Of course, when we talk about the sequence of meditation, one initially meditates on selflessness of person because it is easier. But that is a slightly different subject. I am asking why someone striving for liberation specifically has to comprehend the selflessness of person first.

We can find the answer to that in the homage at the beginning *Introduction to the Middle Way* where it says,

***Starting grasping at self initially naming 'I'  
Generating attachment for phenomena named  
'mine'  
Praise to whatever becomes compassion for  
migrators  
Traversing without freedom, like a bucket in a  
well***

We can grasp the answer if we look at ***the twelve links of dependent origination***, where the very first link is the link of ignorance. The dependent link of ***ignorance*** is the link that initiates the whole chain reaction of all the subsequent links of ***karma, consciousness, name and form, the six senses, contact, feeling, craving, grasping, becoming, birth, ageing and death***. Without that very first link of ignorance, all subsequent links will fall away.

What is the meaning of true-grasping?

*Student: Belief that the 'I' and 'mine' exist truly.*

Are you sure that is the definition of self-grasping?

An awareness that grasps at its object as truly existent is the accurate definition. If we just relate it to grasping a truly existent 'I' and 'mine', then what happens to the grasping at the truly existent vase for example? Grasping at a truly existent vase is not grasping at a truly existent 'I' or 'mine'. How many types of self-grasping do we have?

*Student: Two*

What are those two?

*Student: Self and phenomena.*

So what does it mean when we say 'person'? Does the person exist or not?

*Student: The person exists.*

What is the meaning or definition of person

*Student: The mere 'I' labelled on any of the five aggregates,*

What are those five aggregates?

*Students: **The five aggregates are form, feeling, recognition, compositional factors and consciousness.***

The five aggregates turn up time and again, so they are very useful to know. What is the meaning of the self-grasping at phenomena?

*Student: Grasping at the existence of phenomena not having the focal object of person.*

We mentioned before that 'mine' is not the person, but that the grasping at an inherently existent 'mine' is self-grasping at person.

*Student: If you grasp at your country as inherently existent would that be an example of a self-grasping phenomena?*

Grasping at one's own country as being inherently existent would be self-grasping at phenomena.

*Student: Is object of negation for intellectually acquired and innate self-grasping the same or different?*

The object of negation, the inherently existent self, appears to both intellectually acquired self-grasping as well as innate self-grasping. Through mistaken tenets intellectually acquired self-grasping establishes the inherently existent self to be valid according to that person's view. Innate self-grasping naturally grasps at the inherently existent self. Inherent existence appears to both of these types of self-grasping.

The object of negation is divided into the object of negation of analysis and the object of negation of a path. For example, true existence would be an analytical object of negation. Why? Take the subject 'a person' - it lacks true existence - because it is a dependent arising. In dependence upon that reason, what is being negated is true existence, and what is being established is the lack of true existence. The predicate is the lack of true existence, and through the reasoning of dependent arising what is being negated is true existence. That is why it says that true existence is the analytical object of negation, while the grasping at true existence is negated by the path. The path is that which acts as the antidote against the grasping itself. The logic refutes true existence and the wisdom, the path that is generated, acts as the antidote to the grasping.

*Transcribed from tape by Bernie Wright*

*Edit 1 by Adair Bunnett*

*Edit 2 by Venerable Tenzin Dongak*

*Edited Version*

**© Tara Institute**