

# Study Group - “Buddhist Tenets”

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གྲུབ་མཐའི་རྣམ་གཞག་བཤམ་པ།

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Try to establish the bodhicitta mind. Use that mind as your motivation for listening to this teaching, and also the practice which you do after your study.

In previous sessions we learnt the definitions of the Buddhist schools of tenets. We also learned how these Buddhist schools of tenets can be classified into four sub-schools, and why there are only four them. What follows is a presentation of each of these schools of tenets.

### 3. Explaining the Vaibashika<sup>1</sup> System

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The first Buddhist school of tenets is the Vaibashika or the Particularist school of tenets, which is a lesser vehicle school of tenets.

#### 3.1 Definition

We begin this by defining who is to be regarded as a proponent of the Particularist school of tenets. A proponent of this lesser vehicle of Buddhist tenets is one who does not assert the self-cognising or self-knowing consciousness, but who asserts that external objects are truly existent or established. This definition says that as a proponent of this school you do not assert self-knowing consciousness. However you do assert that external objects have a truly established existence. First of all we need to explain the meaning of these terms.

*Self-knowing consciousness* is obviously referring to some form of consciousness. Generally speaking *consciousness* means something which is clear and knowing. There are two aspects to clear and knowing. *Objective clear and knowing consciousness* is clear and knowing with respect to the perceived object. We can also talk about the *clear and knowing* in terms of the *subjective* mind itself, that is in terms of the consciousness knowing itself.

We can also talk about consciousness in terms of what it experiences. It experiences the perceived object. This is what consciousness perceives. In addition the experience that the consciousness perceives can be consciousness itself, which is the subject.

The different schools of tenets talk about consciousness in terms of the meaning of clear and knowing with reference to both the object and the subject, which is consciousness itself. This school of Particularists does not assert this so-called self-knowing consciousness.

What this school does assert is the existence of external objects. What are *external objects*? It means, for instance, the existence of a partless particle which is something this school of Particularists accepts. According to this school, anything which has an established base must be truly established. *Truly established* means that things exist autonomously, from their own side.

#### 3.2 Classification

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Next is the subdivisions of this school. As you find in the root

text there are three subdivisions:

1. The Kashmiri Advocates
2. The Aparantakas or Under the Sun Advocates
3. The Magadhas or Central Advocates

The main three are given here, but in some other texts there are up to 18 subdivisions of the Particularists.

#### 3.3 Etymology

In the root text there are two main reasons given for the name of this school. The first one is that proponents of this school use the text called *The Great Detailed Exposition* as their main scriptural source.

The other reason for their name is because proponents of this school assert the view that the three times, (the past, present and future times), are all momentary parts that can be substantially established.

As said before the main text for this school is the so-called *The Great Detailed Exposition*<sup>2</sup> which is a collection of texts on metaphysics, or knowledge and contains the meaning of all seven collections of the seven treatises on knowledge. According to the followers of the Particularist school, these scriptures are regarded as the actual word of the Buddha, or sutras. They were composed mainly by an arhat called Tchak shog Nyes pas, although many other arhats contributed to it, so it is a combined work. However, all the other schools above this one like the next school, the Sautantrika or Sutra school, do not accept that these seven collections of these treatises as sutras.

#### 3.4 Method Of Asserting the Objects

The next main heading is the method of asserting the view on the object.

Generally speaking *object* refers to an object of the mind. To the subjective mind it is an object for the eye sense consciousness. So there is the object, and the subject which is the eye sense-consciousness. Here the *view on the object* means an object that has an existence.

#### Definition of a ‘thing’

In the root text there is a definition of the term *thing*, which is any phenomena able to perform a function. It is synonymous with *existent thing*, *existence* and the *object of knowledge*, according to this school. This means that this school is saying that anything that exists, or has an established base is also a thing, or in Tibetan *ngo po* [dngos po].

Later we shall learn that according to the Sutra school of tenets the term ‘thing’ or *ngo po* only includes those phenomenon which are subject to impermanence, and which are dependent upon causes and conditions and so on. This Particularist school says that all phenomenon are things, that they are existent, and that they are objects of knowledge.

It is important that we try to understand the stand point or view of whatever particular school of tenet that we are studying. There are so many different terms, and each school of tenets has a different interpretation of their meaning.

Here for instance, the definition of this term ‘thing’ is “a phenomena capable of performing a function”. Generally all the other schools only use the term ‘thing’ for those phenomena which are impermanent, and which are a produced thing. Generally, they do not say that unproduced things like permanent objects are classified as things, because they say that they are not capable of performing a function.

However according to this school of Particularists a permanent thing, like for example, an uncompounded object, such as uncompounded space, is a thing. As such it is capable of performing a function. So what is its function? This school says that it performs the function of allowing the air to move and to

<sup>1</sup> The terms Vaibashika, Great Exposition and Particularist are synonyms for the same school. They are used interchangeably.

<sup>2</sup> The Mahavibhassa.

exist. They are saying that without space things such as the air cannot exist.

If we talk in terms of an empty cup, we can fill that cup with liquid because there is a space in the cup. This is saying that space as a phenomena performs some function. All objects even permanent phenomena, and the functions that they perform are able to serve as an object of consciousness. They can serve as a basis for consciousness to arise. From the point of view of serving as the basis for consciousness, all permanent phenomena can be called a 'thing'.

### Definition of Existence

In studying the various tenets of Buddhist philosophy it is important to try to familiarise yourself with the various terms that are used, and the definitions of those terms that you find in the root text. The root text says that all phenomenon are existent. What is the definition of existence? Generally **existence** is defined as a phenomena which is established by a prime or valid cognition.

**Valid or prime cognition** refers to a valid mind which cognises an object. Whether something is existent or non-existent is a matter of whether that thing is an established truth to this valid or prime cognition. Of course to understand that we need to know what prime cognition means. Prime cognition is a mind which is new, and incontrovertible. These definitions of valid cognition now explain that if something is established by this prime cognition then it is a truth - it exists.

Prime cognition means a mind which is incontrovertible, in the sense that whatever object cognised by that mind exists in reality, in truth. In Tibetan valid cognition is *tshe ma*. We sometimes attach that term to a person, so we call the Lord Buddha a valid person, as in *tshe ma kye bo*. He is a valid person because whatever he said accords with reality, it accords with the truth.

Earlier when defining 'thing' we came across this term 'object of knowledge'. In Tibetan this is '*she ja*', and it is also quite a common term referring to existence, or to phenomena, or objects. An **object of knowledge** is a phenomena which is a suitable object of awareness for the mind.

We are going through these definitions very quickly here, but try to familiarise yourself with their meaning.

### 3.4.1 Types of Things

Having given the definition of a thing the root text refers to two types of things - permanent things and impermanent things.

#### 3.4.1.1 Permanent and Impermanent

**3.4.1.1.1 Permanent things** In the root text the examples of permanent things are un compounded space and the two types of cessation - analytical cessation and non-analytical cessation.

**Un compounded space** is a state which is a mere absence of obstruction and contact. The fact that you can move your hand freely in the space in front of you is because there is un compounded space there. Aeroplanes are able to fly through the sky because they are un obstructed. When the plane passes through cloud formations there may be some experience of turbulence, because of contact within the cloud, whereas space is un obstructive and free of contact.

**Analytical cessation** refers to the state of cessation of having abandoned all the contaminated afflictions. When you achieve that analytical state of cessation, then whatever things you have abandoned you have permanently eliminated. The reason 'analytical cessation' is used is because it is the qualities which you attain through the force of analytical wisdom. Through this force you explore, for example, the wisdom realising the four Noble Truths. Through the force of thoroughly observing and analysing this truth, you can permanently eradicate afflictive emotions. That state of cessation is a permanent separation from the object of its abandonment.

**Non-analytical cessation** is also a state of cessation, but it is the state where although the object of abandonment is prevented from arising, it is not yet abandoned. Even though the object of abandonment no longer arises it is not yet completely abandoned, in the sense of not having been uprooted. Such a cessation is a non-analytical cessation because achieving it does not depend upon the type of analytical wisdom which you need to gain analytical cessation.

**3.4.1.1.2 Impermanent Things** This refers to any phenomena or object which is produced in the sense that it arises from its cause. Similarly then, any phenomena which is created is also something which is subject to a cause. Impermanent phenomena change from moment to moment.

#### 3.4.1.2 Conventional and Ultimate Truth

The root text further classifies 'things' into two in terms of the two types of truth, conventional and ultimate truth. You might have heard in teaching that the two truths are the basis whereas method and wisdom are the path and the result are the two types of body, the Dharmakaya and Rupakaya. We shall discuss the two truths in the next teaching.

Before we finish I would like you to list the four seals of Buddhism:

1. All products are impermanent
2. All contaminated phenomena are suffering
3. All phenomena are empty/selfless
4. Nirvana is peace

When we engage in the study of Buddhist tenets or even when we engage in Buddhist practice, how much we progress and the knowledge we acquire is all a matter of our knowledge and practice of these four seals of Buddhism.

In terms of practice, if you develop a good awareness of the first seal, that all products are impermanent, then in your daily experience whatever things you perceive, or experience, or with which you come into contact you will have an awareness that the nature of things is impermanent. For example the nature of this glass is impermanent. If your awareness of this is always sustained, and if by accident the glass fell and broke into pieces you will see that as a demonstration of the impermanent nature of the glass and nothing else. It will not be a sudden major shock, or a sudden cause of dissatisfaction, or disappointment to the mind.

An awareness of impermanence with respect to all things, even those things which we cherish so much and to which we are so attached, can help us to reduce the amount of dissatisfaction we undergo when we are separated from, or lose those objects.

Of course in practice it is not always something very easy to stop worrying. However we can find an awareness of impermanence to be really effective in minimising the pain and suffering which results from such situations.

With the second seal that all contaminated phenomena are suffering, recall what Lama Tsong Khapa said that when he compared this samsaric life with the useless husks which we send in the air as chaff. Samsaric, worldly things are very appealing, and seemingly having some sort of meaning and essence. However in reality no matter how long we experience them we cannot find that meaning for which we are always looking. Quite often they have the opposite effect: the suffering that we experience is often the result of these samsaric things.

The third seal that all phenomena are empty and selfless is about gaining a realisation of selflessness. By gaining that realisation we are counteracting the ignorant self-grasping which is the root cause of the unending round of suffering that we undergo.

Of course 'nirvana is peace' shows the fruit or result which we can reach by gaining the wisdom of selflessness.

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