

# Study Group - “Buddhist Tenets”

## Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

### Translated by Sandup Tsering

གྲུབ་མཐའི་རྣམ་གཞག་བཤམ་པ།

17 April 2001

Try to cultivate a proper motivation of purely seeking an ultimate spiritual goal unassociated with any goal of this life. Generate the thought of listening to this teaching to achieve complete enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings.

#### Review of Previous Teachings

Within Buddhism there are several Buddhist schools of tenets, and the main criteria distinguishing one school of tenets from another is their philosophical stance, [in particular their] view on the ultimate nature of reality.

Of the four main Buddhist schools of tenets the first two are the Vaibashika (the school of the Great Exposition) and Sautrantika (school of Sutra). The nature of ultimate reality, according to these two lower schools, is a philosophical view about the emptiness of, for instance, a person. This refers to a person's emptiness of being substantially existent in the sense of self-sufficiency. This selflessness of person is the main assertion of these two lower schools of tenets.

Of the two lower schools of tenets, the Great Exposition school assert only the selflessness of a person. They do not assert the selflessness of other phenomena. They say that all phenomena have the status of a self of phenomena, therefore they are not empty, or are not negating this self of phenomena.

Whereas with respect to the two higher Buddhist schools of tenets, the ultimate view of reality of the Cittamatin school is the emptiness of the separate entities of the object, and the mind which perceives the object. The view of the Madhyamika or Middle Way school is based on the emptiness or lack of true existence [of both self and phenomena].

#### 3.6 The Method of Asserting Selflessness

We now return to the views of the lower school of Great Exposition. As said before, generally speaking the main view of emptiness of this school is the selflessness of persons. The general stance refers to the person's emptiness of being substantially existent in the sense of being self-sufficient.

#### The Vasiputriya Sub-school

Within the Great Exposition school there are many sub-schools. One of these, called in Tibetan *nes-ma bu-pa*, or Vasiputriya in Sanskrit, does not assert the selflessness of a person from the point of view of a person's emptiness of being substantially existent in the sense of self-sufficient. Rather, to this sub-school the selflessness of a person means the person being empty of a self that is permanent, partless and independent.

#### Why the Vasiputriyas Are Regarded as Buddhist

The answer to the question of whether all the proponents of the Buddhist schools of tenets assert the view of the selflessness of a person depends upon the interpretation of the meaning of 'selflessness of a person'. If the interpretation is the person's emptiness of being substantially existent in the sense of self-sufficiency then the answer is no. That is because, as we said, the Vasiputriyas do not accept that view. However if your interpretation of the meaning of 'selflessness of a person' is the person's emptiness of a self or an entity which is permanent, partless or singular and independent self, then all the four schools of tenets [including the Vasiputriyas] accept that view.

#### Relationship to the Four Seals

One way of defining a proponent of a Buddhist school of tenets is that a proponent accepts the four seals of Buddhism. One of these four seals is that all phenomena are empty and selfless. That meaning of selfless [implies] all phenomena as selfless

from the point of view of the emptiness of a self that is permanent, singular and independent. Using that general Buddhist view of selflessness then all the proponents of the Buddhist schools of tenets are qualified by that definition.

Otherwise, as we said before, if we interpret the meaning of 'selflessness of the person' in the sense of a substantially existent self in the sense of self-sufficiency, then we would be excluding that one Great Exposition sub-school. As far as their philosophical view is concerned, they do not qualify as Buddhist. However they are included by virtue of their stance on practices, or deeds, or the conduct which we have to practise on the path.

#### The Vasiputriya Argument

The root text gives a reason why this particular Great Exposition sub-school does not accept the view of the person's emptiness of being substantially existent in the sense of self-sufficiency. It is because this sub-school asserts the view that a person is not same as, nor different from the aggregates of a person. It is also a self which is neither permanent nor impermanent, but which exists substantially. It is substantially existent in the sense of being self-sufficient. They cite the Buddha's teaching that all phenomena are empty of self as the reason for asserting this self-sufficient, existent self of a person.

One of the reasons why the other schools think that the person cannot be a separate entity from the aggregates is that if they are separate it is as if the person exists outside of, independently from, or unrelated to the self. Likewise to say that if a person exists as the same entity as the aggregates, this gives rise to the problem that just as there are many aggregates, so too there would be many persons or selves.

#### 3.7 Explaining the Principles of the Grounds and Paths

The next heading is the presentation of the stages of grounds and paths. This heading is elaborated under the two main subheadings:

1. The objects to be abandoned by the path
2. The actual teaching on grounds and the paths.

##### 3.7.1 Objects to be Abandoned by the Path

First of all, what are the objects abandoned by the path? This concerns the obstructions on the path. According to this school of Great Exposition obstructions are classified into:

1. Afflictive obstructions
2. Non-afflictive obstructions

Here obstructions refers to obstructions to achieving the state of liberation, or to achieving the all-knowing state of buddhahood, or complete enlightenment.

##### 3.7.1.1 Afflictive Obstructions

According to the Great Exposition school afflictive obstructions are the main obstruction to achieving the state of liberation. They refer to all the afflictive states of mind or mental delusions. The main mental delusion or afflictive obstruction is the mind that apprehends a person as being substantially existent in the sense of being self-sufficient, as well as the seed of that mind.

If we elaborate, we can list all the afflictive obstructions in terms of the ten root afflictions or mental delusions and their seeds. The ten root mental delusions can be divided into two groups: the five view root delusions<sup>1</sup> and their seeds, and the five non-view root delusions<sup>2</sup> and their seeds.

The difference between 'seed' and 'latency' is that 'seed of the mind' means there is a potential in the mind which has the capacity to manifest the same type of mind in the future continuum of the mind.

##### 3.7.1.2 Non Afflictive Obscurations

<sup>1</sup> Editor: View of the transitory collections, Extreme view, Holding the aggregates to be supreme, Holding an inferior morality to be superior, Wrong view.

<sup>2</sup> Editor: Desire, Anger, Pride, Ignorance, Doubt

Latency is the appropriate term when you talk of the main example for non-afflictive obstructions. The main non-afflictive obstruction is the latency left in the mind by the mind that apprehends the person as being substantially existent in the sense of self-sufficient. Each of the other delusions also has a latency.

The root text refers to non-afflictive obstructions as a kind of weakness [or mental decline] in the mind. In Tibetan this weakness is called *ne nya-len*<sup>3</sup>. In addition to a mental *ne nya-len* there is also a physical *ne nya-len*. Those of you who studied the topic of the calm abiding meditation may recall that we described at length these physical and mental *ne nya-len* or disadvantages, which cause some unsuitability in the functioning of our body and the mind. The remedy to purify that disadvantage is developing the so-called mental and physical state of pliancy.<sup>4</sup>

What we are saying here is that the mental *ne nya-lens* are non-afflictive obstructions. Even a being who has achieved the state of liberation, (called a foe destroyer or *arhat* in Sanskrit), has this latency. Even though they are free and have completely uprooted the mind that apprehends the self of the person, they still possess the latency of that misconception with respect to the ultimate nature of the person.

Even though they have overcome all the mental delusions and so forth, they still possess the latency of those delusions. They are certain that their actions and conduct cannot be called negative or non-virtuous actions but something in their conduct is inappropriate or unsuitable. They might physically move in a manner that resembles a hopping monkey, or their speech may contain some very inappropriate word. However it is not a negative or non-virtuous action such as harsh speech.

A being who, as a foe destroyer, has achieved the state of liberation still possesses some form of mental dullness or darkness. Just as darkness can hinder our visual eye from perceiving things, so dullness in the mind of a foe destroyer obstructs them from seeing all things.

### 3.7.1.2.1 Causes of Not Knowing

Generally speaking there are four causes of not knowing.

1. The first cause of not knowing things is **profundity and the vastness of the Buddha's teachings**. In one of the sutras the Buddha asked his disciple Shariputra, "Have you understood all the teachings that I have given, such as the teaching on the heap of morality and so on?" Shariputra replied that he had not understood [them all]. That was because the Buddha's teaching on morality and so on is too profound and vast.

2. The next cause of not knowing is **distance of the object of knowledge**. One of the classic examples of someone not knowing because of this cause concerns another of the Buddha's disciples, Maudgalyanaputra, who was generally renowned for his power of miracles and so on. He could not see that his mother had been reborn in the northern realm called the land of Radiant Light, [and had to ask the Buddha].

3. The third cause of not knowing is **length of time**. The example of not being able to see an object because of the length of time is another story concerning the disciple Shariputra.

A very old (over a hundred years) lay person who had spent his life with his family as a householder, [developed] a sense of detachment from his family. He decided to renounce the world and to take novice vows. Shariputra said to him that he was not eligible because he did not have the so-called root virtue to receive the novice vow.

However later on the Buddha said that he did have the necessary root virtue enabling him to take the novice vow. As

the story of this lay person (whose name in Tibetan is *Khyim bdag dpal skyes*)<sup>5</sup> goes, the root virtue that the Buddha saw that would make him fit to take the novice vow, was that aeons and aeons ago, in one of his past lives, he was born as a fly, and circumambulated a stupa or relic.

This is a story about the benefits of circumambulating a holy stupa or reliquary. In the case of this old man in one of his past lives he was born as a fly that lived in dry cow dung. He made a ball of the dung and by coincidence the ball of the dung went around the stupa. So that was the root virtue that he created. Another story concerns a pig that went around a stupa because it was being chased by a dog. As a result of that, the pig accumulated enough merit to take rebirth in the godly realm called the land of Thirty-Three Gods. So every time we walk into this centre, if we circumambulate the stupa in the entrance hall we also are accumulating such virtues.

One simple meditation you can do while circumambulating a stupa is to imagine that there is a buddha in the stupa. You imagine the rays of light from that buddha radiating to all directions, bringing back and absorbing the qualities and blessings of all the buddhas residing in the ten directions. Then as you circumambulate the stupa you imagine the light shining forth from the buddha in the stupa. As it strikes you it purifies all the negativities of your three doors. At the same time you receive the blessings of the buddhas' body, speech and mind.

The fourth cause for not knowing is **the multitudinous numbers of objects**. First of all, how do you know that your perceptions of the glass that I am holding are not the perceptions of an omniscient mind? There is a difference between the way we perceive this glass and the way the omniscient mind of a buddha perceives it.

As far as we are concerned, we see it very clearly with our visual consciousness and so does a buddha. By closing our eyes we do not use our visual consciousness, and we do not see the glass very clearly unless we have clairvoyant powers. One distinction in regard to this fourth cause of not knowing is the multiple aspects of the glass. What would a Buddha see that we do not see?

Answer [from a student]: The living beings in the water.

Of course what you said is correct. We can guess or assume but do not actually directly see any animals or germs in the glass. The Buddha, however, can directly see any bacteria. Also we can ask questions like "Who is the person who manufactured this glass?" to which we do not know the answer. If however you ask, "In which shop did you buy this glass?" some people might know. Then again, although we see this glass as a solid thing, which can hold water, it is in fact made up of a collection of atoms and so on. When a buddha mind looks at it he can see every single atom which comprises this glass, as well as all previous causes, and causes of causes and so on. All we see is the whole shape of the glass and none of its atoms.

As ordinary beings, if we had a look at the cockpit of an aeroplane we would not have a clue about what each [button, lever or gauge] does. This shows us that there are a lot of things we might know, but that other people do not. Generally we can see how gaining knowledge of things is limitless. A fully enlightened is a being who has a mind that possesses the fully developed knowledge of all the things that exist!

I first went to see the cockpit of an aeroplane when I travelled to New Zealand with Alan Molloy. I thought that it was amazing to see all the things there. I was just amazed that what people can achieve in terms of gaining knowledge of how things work, if they make an effort.

In a spiritual path we talk about the knowledge of the mind, or inner knowledge. When you talk of outer knowledge, or knowledge of the outer world, it can quite amaze us when we

<sup>3</sup> Ed: The Tibetan term *ne nya-len* has no direct translation. It refers to those obstacles acquired with one's rebirth. Tsepa Rigzin's *Tibetan - English Dictionary of Buddhist Terminology* defines *gnas-ngan-len* as taking unfortunate rebirth.

<sup>4</sup> Study Group, 18 April 2000

<sup>5</sup> Also known in Sanskrit as the Shrijata. See pp 440, *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand*, Wisdom Publications for further detail.

---

see the knowledge some people possess.

© *Tara Institute*