

Study Group - “Buddhist Tenets”

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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Generate the mind of bodhicitta, the aspiration to achieve complete enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings, as your motivation. Then think that in order to fulfil this bodhicitta aspiration one is listening to these teachings and will put them into practice.

4. Explaining the System of the School of Sutra

Tonight we begin the teaching on the lower school of tenets called the School of Sutra. This school is also known as the Sautrantika School.

4.1 Definition

First we define a person who is a proponent of tenets of the school of Sutra.

A proponent of the Sutra school of tenets is defined here as a proponent of the Lesser Vehicle tenets who asserts the existence of both self knowing consciousness and external objects.

As we recall, the definition of a proponent of the lesser school of Great Exposition does not assert a self-knowing consciousness. So we need to know the school of Sutrist definition of **self-knowing consciousness** and of external objects. In our discussion on 20 March 2001 we covered the idea of self-knowing consciousness. This school of Sutra accepts the definition given there.

External objects are defined as the formation of gross objects as a result of the collection of many partless particles, or atoms. According to this school the mind and these external objects are separate substantial entities. When we talk in terms of a mind that apprehends the form of an external object, the mind that apprehends the form and the form that is its object, are two separate substantial entities. This is not accepted by the Mind Only School¹.

The school of Sutra accepts the separate substantial entities of subject and object. For example, the eye sense consciousness that perceives a visual form and the object of that perception are two entities because they are like cause and effect. The visual form is the condition or cause for the eye sense consciousness to arise. This finishes the definition of a proponent of the school of Sutra.

The next thing said in the root text is that a proponent of the Sutra school of tenets and an Exemplifier, (who uses examples to explain things), are synonymous terms.

4.2 Classification

There are two types proponents of the school of Sutra: Followers of Scriptures and Followers of Reason.

4.2.1 Followers of Scripture

It is said that most of the assertions made by proponents of the school of Sutra following the Scriptures are the same as those of a proponent of the Great Exposition school. However there are some clear differences between the two.

Firstly they differ in terms of the scripture which is used as the main authoritative source. The proponents of the school Sutra following the scriptures rely upon Vasubandu's

*Treasury of Manifest Knowledge*². The proponent of tenet of Sutra following the scripture do not accept the seven compendiums of knowledge, a collection of texts regarded as a main scriptural source of the Great Exposition school. They do not accept them as authentic scriptures. They regard them as a collected work by various Arhats.

Secondly there is a difference between the assertions made by proponents of the school of Sutra and those made by proponents of the Great Exposition. For example, proponents of the Great Exposition school assert the idea of simultaneous cause and effect. They say, for example, that the primary mind and all the mental factors that accompany it are concomitant. That is, the mental factors coexisting with the primary mind are cause and effect.

The Proponents of the tenets of this school of Sutra refute this idea of the coexistence of cause and effect. They do not regard primary consciousness and the concomitant mental factor as a case of cause and effect, because the two share the same entity or nature.

Other than this, the assertions of proponents of the school of Sutra about the two types of truth, conventional and ultimate truth, accord with those of the Great Exposition school.

Regarding the definition of the two types of truth, proponents of both the Great Exposition school and the school of Sutra use quotations from the *Abhidharmakosa* (or the *Treasury of the Manifest Knowledge*).

4.2.2 Followers of Reason

The proponents of tenets of the school of Sutra following Reason mainly use Dharmakirti's *Seven Treatises of Valid Cognition* as their scriptural source. These seven treatises are commentaries on Dignaga's text, *Compendium of Valid Cognition*³.

Definition of Valid Cognition

The title of Dignaga's text uses the term 'valid cognition' which indicates the main theme or subject matter of the text. What is valid cognition? It is a mind or an awareness which is new and incontrovertible with respect to its object.

The *Seven Treatises of Valid Cognition* can be listed in two groups. The first group of three is called the main body, and the other group of four is called the branch of scripture.

The main body of three are ordered according to the degree of detail of their explanation of valid cognition. The first one Dharmakirti's commentary on Dignaga's *Compendium of Valid Cognition*. This is the extensive exposition. The medium explanation on valid cognition is called *Ascertainment of Valid Cognition*, and the brief explanation is called *Drop of Reasoning*.

The group of four, the branches of text, includes *Drop of Logic, Analysis of Relations, rules or reasoning Principles of Debate* and *Proving the Continuum of Others*.

Together these comprise the *Seven Treatises of Valid Cognition*. The term valid cognition in the title in fact refers to Chandrakirti's text, *Compendium on Valid Cognition*, where the reference is to the actual valid cognition, which is an awareness that is new and incontrovertible with respect to its object.

4.3 Etymology

Why are the proponents of this school called proponents of the school of Sutra? It is because they advocate tenets that are based on the sutras of the Bhagavan Buddha. They are also called Exemplifiers because they are particularly good

² This text is also known as Abhidharmakosa.

³ In some texts Dignaga's text is called Sutra of Valid Cognition.

¹ The Mind Only School is the third school of tenets

at explaining all things by means of examples. A proponent of the tenets of the school of Sutra is a master of using examples to reveal and explain all phenomena.

4.4 Method of Asserting Objects/Assertions of this School of Tenets

We now turn to the main assertions of the proponents of tenets of the school of Sutra. This will be discussed mainly from the point of view of proponents of the tenets of Sutra Following Reason.

4.4.1 Assertions on the Basis

4.4.1.1 Assertions regarding the object

Existent things and non-existent things

We begin by defining what is existent and what is non-existent. An existent thing is defined as something that is observed by a valid or prime cogniser. Therefore the question of whether or not a particular thing or object is existent or non-existent depends on whether or not there is a valid cogniser for that particular object.

It is particularly important to know the precise meaning of 'valid cogniser'. Unless we know we know that, the definition of whether or not something is existent for a valid cogniser would not make any sense. A valid cogniser is a valid mind that is new and incontrovertible with respect to its objects.

If we relate the idea of valid cogniser to our own mind, we have realised a valid cognition in respect to any object when we have gained a definitive knowledge of the object. In terms of Dharma knowledge, if we gained valid cognition of that knowledge, we develop a final and very certain knowledge. Based on such a valid cognition of Dharma we have an unwavering faith that is absolutely stable.

4.4.1.2 Classifications of Existent Things

The Two Truths

After defining them, the text goes on to classify existent things. The one classification is into the two truths, conventional and ultimate.

Ultimate truth

Here the definition of ultimate truth is a phenomena which is ultimately able to perform a function. This is not the same as the definition used by a proponent of the Great Exposition school. Yet from our discussions earlier it was very clear that the definitions used by proponents of the school of Sutra following Scripture are the same as those used by the Great Exposition School. [As this definition of ultimate truth is different from that used by the Great Exposition School,] it must be according to proponents of the tenets of the school of Sutra following Reason.

The root text says that ultimate truth is synonymous with something ultimately established, a functioning thing, a product, impermanent, compounded phenomena, substance, and specifically characterised phenomena. These specifically characterised phenomena are not just mentally imputed, but they actually exist from their own side. All these terms are synonymous with ultimate truth. Whatever is one is also the other. Therefore we see very clearly, that according to this school of Sutra ultimate truth is synonymous with impermanent, product, and functioning things. This is a quite different definition of ultimate truth from that of the Great Exposition school.

Here the definition of ultimate truth is that it is something that is able to ultimately perform a function. The indication of the words 'ultimately perform' is something that has the capacity to produce a result. So in this instance ultimate truth is concerned with things which are cause and effect.

Whereas all those things which are classified as permanent phenomena are conventional truths.

Implications for our Practice

As we study the various schools of tenets it is important not just to know the definitions by heart, and to familiarise ourselves with the classifications. We should also try to understand the implications for our spiritual practice. If we talk in terms of practice, then creating a positive action is, according to this school, an ultimate truth.

The word 'ultimate' implies that it definitely has the capacity to produce a result. However it cannot be a result cannot be a random result. Rather it must accord with the cause. Therefore if it produces a result and the action is positive, the result that accords with this cause is happiness. Likewise if the action is negative, then the action ultimately performing the function will produce the result of suffering.

We are going through the text very quickly. In your own time, if you like, you can study the meaning of all the different terms that we find here, such as 'things', 'functioning things', 'impermanent', and 'compound phenomena'. Try to see what each of these definitions adds to a description of the nature of things.

We discussed valid cognition before in terms of our practice. Whether or not the conviction and faith that we gain in our spiritual practice is strong and stable has a lot to do with the level of our knowledge, or realisation, of Dharma. If we gain faith in our Dharma or spiritual practice through gaining valid cognitions about our practice, then the faith we gain is everlasting.

The fact is that for many of us our faith in Dharma as a very beneficial practice is fleeting. Sometimes we find our practice to be very beneficial; on other occasions we do not see it that way and we become distant from our practice. This fluctuation happens because we have not gained a faith that is based on valid cognition of the Dharma.

What follows next is another tabulation of conventional truths, and a few other terms that are synonymous with conventional truth. After that there is the classification of existence in terms of two types of phenomena, negative and positive phenomena.

Regarding the division of existence into positive and negative phenomena, Geshe-la remembers that when he taught the topic of logic at Kopan monastery in 1982, everybody found it very difficult to review and discuss. At the time the translator was Thubten Sherab who is a student at Lama Tsong Khapa Institute. At the teaching Thubten Sherab could not find the right word and he asked the students to help him, but nobody did. Geshe-la still remembers, that he said to Geshe-la, "I had a bit of an argument with the students before the teachings, so now they are not helping me".

This topic is an essential one. If you understand this topic of negative and positive phenomena, it will help you to understand the idea of emptiness and selflessness.

We end the session here. Next week we have discussion night, with the written test in the following week. We shall do the same as last month, which is to say, the questions for the test, including the compulsory question, will be selected from the list of discussion questions.

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Note on authentication

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