

Transcript of teachings by Khen Rinpoche Geshe Chonyi

Root text: *Presentation of Tenets* by Jetsün Chökyi Gyaltzen, translated by Glen Svensson. Copyright: Glen Svensson, April 2005. Reproduced for use in the FPMT Basic Program with permission from Glen Svensson

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Lesson No: 2

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The great Kadampa masters of the past said, “All sentient beings by nature have the buddha lineage.” What they are saying is that all sentient beings, from time without beginning, i.e., ever since they came into existence, have the buddha lineage or buddha nature. All sentient beings always had this natural potential to become enlightened and to become a buddha.

Having said that, however, if sentient beings do not possess the developmental lineage, they will not be able to achieve full enlightenment. Although all sentient beings have buddha nature since time immemorial, from our side, we still need to put in effort and strive to achieve results such as attaining a good rebirth as a human being or as a celestial being.

By nature we have the potential to achieve enlightenment. It is there. But if we don't put in the effort, we would not achieve enlightenment. Of course enlightenment is possible because we have the potential. If the potential is not there in the first place, then no matter what we do, it would be a waste of time.

All of us have the potential to become fully enlightened because we have buddha nature within us. Likewise all of us have the potential and ability to learn and understand the teachings of the Buddha. Having said that, how much we get out of our studies depends on our individual effort. When it comes to learning and studying the Buddha's teachings, individual interest and effort are very important.

The Kadampa masters gave an analogy of churning milk in order to get butter. Although the milk is the cause of the butter, if you do not churn the milk, you will not get any butter. The butter is not going to come about from its own side. The point that I am trying to make is that you have to put in effort from your own side. You have the potential to study and learn so all you need to do is to put in the effort.

Do you remember the definition of consciousness from the previous module? Consciousness is that which is clear and knowing. It is a naturally occurring phenomenon. We all have a mind that is clear and knowing. The mind has the ability to learn. We have to activate that mind.

I pay homage to the eminent holy beings who are in essence inseparable from Guru Protector Manjushri.

Here, in explaining the presentation of tenets, there are three outlines:

1. definition,
2. divisions, and
3. the meaning of each division.

1. Definition

The definition of a person who propounds Buddhist tenets is: a person propounding tenets who accepts the Three Jewels to be the final objects of refuge and who does not assert any objects of refuge other than them.

2 Divisions

There are four divisions of proponents of Buddhist tenets:

1. The Proponents of the Great Exposition (*Sanskrit: Vaibhasika*),
2. The Proponents of Sutra (*Skt. Sautrantika*),
3. The Proponents of Mind Only (*Skt. Cittamatra*) and
4. The Proponents of the Middle Way (*Skt. Madhyamika*).

The first two are also called ‘the two schools that propound [truly existent external] objects’.

3 The meaning of each division

The explanation of the

1. Great Exposition School,
2. Sutra School,
3. Mind Only School and
4. Middle Way School (Page 1).

In the previous lesson I talked about the purpose and reasons for studying tenets. There are many reasons for studying tenets but one of the most important reasons for studying tenets is to be able to understand the subtle meaning of dependent-arising.

Why is it important to understand the subtle meaning of dependent-arising?
Lama Tsongkhapa mentioned in his *Three Principles of the Path*:

Without the wisdom realising ultimate reality,
Even though you have generated renunciation and the mind of
enlightenment
You cannot cut the root cause of circling.
Therefore, attempt the method to realise dependent-arising.

One of the main reasons why we are studying tenets is to arrive at the understanding of the subtle meaning of dependent-arising. Lama Tsongkhapa said that it is very important to do so without which we cannot cut the root of our suffering in samsara.

In our study of tenets, we are going to look at the assertions put forth by the four Buddhist tenets or the four schools. All of them have their own ways of presenting selflessness and explaining what selflessness is exactly.

As we progress up the hierarchy of these Buddhist tenets, we will see that the explanation of selflessness becomes increasingly subtler. It is only by seeing how the presentations of selflessness become more and more subtle that you will be able to appreciate the subtlety of the presentation of the highest school. You would be then able to compare their presentation against those of the lower schools.

Tenets in Tibetan is made up of two syllables, *grub* and *mtha*, *grub mtha*. The literal translation of *grub mtha* in English is “an established conclusion.”

- In this context, what does “established” (*grub*) mean? It means that it is a thesis that is decided upon and established in reliance upon scripture and/or reasoning from the perspective of your own mind. From the perspective of your mind, your decision is correct but, in reality, it does not mean that it is correct.
- *Mtha* in Tibetan means a limit. In this context, it can be translated as “conclusion,” i.e., you have concluded that it is like that.

So now we know roughly that a tenet means an established conclusion.

There are two types of persons:

1. Those whose minds have been affected by tenets.
2. Those whose minds have not been affected by tenets.

Who are those whose minds are not affected by tenets or who do not hold on to any tenets?

They are people who are not interested in, who do not bother to find out, or investigate what reality is. When it comes to past and future lives, or reincarnation, they are also not interested. They do not analyse and check whether there are past and future lives. Rather they focus on the things of this life alone, i.e., what they can see and hear in this life. They do not really think too much about things.

Who are those whose minds have been affected by or who are holding on to tenets?

They are people who focus not only on the affairs or happiness of this life but they also take an interest and put effort in finding out about how things really work and what the nature of reality is, i.e. – we talked about this in the last lesson - the basis and the different facets of reality.

These individuals think about and come to their own conclusion about what reality is. Based on their own conclusions, they live their life according to certain principles, abandoning certain activities or ways of thinking, and cultivating certain activities and ways of thinking.

Generally speaking, there are two types of tenets:

1. Non-Buddhist tenets
2. Buddhist tenets

Pertaining to the Buddhist tenets, there are four schools.

In the first place, we have to understand the difference between Outsiders and Insiders. Here we usually say non-Buddhists and Buddhists. We Buddhists are the Insiders. A Buddhist is someone who:

- accepts the Three Jewels to be the final objects of refuge and
- has faith in the ability of the Three Jewels to protect him from the sufferings of the lower realms and the sufferings of samsara.

In short, someone who does not have that single-pointed conviction and faith in the Three Jewels is not a Buddhist.

We would like to think that Buddhism and being a Buddhist is the best thing in life. But just thinking that alone is not very helpful and insufficient. In order to see that being a Buddhist is the best thing we can be, we must have an object of comparison.

In this case, with whom are we comparing ourselves? We are comparing ourselves to the Outsiders, the non-Buddhists. In order to see the special features of the Buddhist teachings and the reasons why being a Buddhist is so special, we first must understand the views and the beliefs of the non-Buddhists.

On the basis of understanding the views of the non-Buddhists, we can then compare their views to the views that are taught in the Buddhist teachings. When we are able to see the big difference between the two, we will then be able to see the special qualities of being a Buddhist. Only then will we really start to appreciate how wonderful it is to be a Buddhist. When we have an understanding of the views of the non-Buddhists, I think it will make a big difference to our minds.

In the text, there is a definition of a person who propounds Buddhist tenets. Exactly who is a person who propounds Buddhist tenets or is a proponent of Buddhist tenets?

In order to understand this, let us look at the three defining characteristics:

1. The founder/teacher
2. The doctrine
3. The view

Our own Buddhist schools have three distinguishing features:

1. The founder/teacher is the Buddha who is someone who has:
 - extinguished every single fault and
 - acquired every single good quality.
2. The doctrine is the teachings of the Buddha that are not harmful to any sentient beings.
3. In general, the view here is that there isn't a person or self that is permanent, unitary, and independent. People usually call such a person or self that is permanent, unitary, and independent, a soul. It is the Buddhist view that the soul, specifically a permanent, unitary, and independent person, does not exist whatsoever.

Another way of explaining a person who propounds Buddhist tenets is someone who asserts the four seals. The four seals were taught by the Buddha just before he passed away into parinirvana and they are:

1. All compounded phenomena are impermanent.
2. All contaminated phenomena are miserable (or in the nature of suffering).
3. All phenomena are empty and selfless.
4. Nirvana is peace.

Someone who accepts these four seals is a proponent of Buddhist tenets. Someone who does not accept these four seals is not a proponent of Buddhist tenets.

To summarise:

1. A Buddhist is someone who accepts the Three Jewels.
2. A proponent of Buddhist tenets is someone who, on the basis of having accepted the Three Jewels as their objects of refuge, accepts the four seals.

The Four Seals

1. All compounded phenomena are impermanent

There is a profound implication behind this statement. “Compounded” can also be translated as composed. A composed phenomenon suggests a phenomenon whose existence comes into being in dependence on the coming together of various causes and conditions. Because its existence is dependent on the coming together of causes and conditions, therefore, that phenomenon is subject to change. When those causes and conditions do not come together, the phenomenon in question would not arise.

Similarly, in order for that phenomenon to go out of existence, causes and conditions must also come together without which the phenomenon will continue to exist.

When we say, “All compounded phenomena are impermanent,” it means that all compounded phenomena undergo momentary change, i.e., in each and every single moment of time, they undergo change.

2. All contaminated things are miserable.

Phenomena can be divided into:

1. Contaminated phenomena
2. Uncontaminated phenomena

What do contaminated phenomena refer to? Here the word, “contaminated,” refers to the afflictions and contaminated phenomena are thus phenomena that are under the influence of afflictions. Such phenomena are miserable or in the nature of suffering. Uncontaminated phenomena, on the other hand, are not in the nature of suffering.

The question then is, “Can contaminated phenomena that are in the nature of suffering be eliminated?” This important question leads us to the third seal, “All phenomena are empty and selfless.”

3. All phenomena are empty and selfless

Upon analysis, we find that all suffering arises primarily from anger and attachment. Where do anger and attachment arise from? When we analyse further, we find that anger and attachment arise from an apprehension of a self.

Can this apprehension of a self be eliminated? There are two things to look at:

1. The self that is apprehended by a mistaken mind. In reality, does such a self exist?
2. Is there an antidote to this apprehension of a self?

Through analysis, one can come to understand that an apprehension of a self is a wrong consciousness because it engages in its object erroneously. Why is this so? Because, while in reality there isn't such a self, the apprehension of a self believes that such a self exists.

Because an apprehension of a self is a wrong consciousness, therefore, in reality, there must be another mind whose mode of apprehension is the complete opposite of that apprehension of a self.

Such a mind is referred to as the wisdom realising selflessness. The wisdom realising selflessness is a valid mind because in reality, there isn't such a self and the wisdom realising selflessness realises it to be so. Therefore it is valid mind.

The definition of a valid cogniser is a newly incontrovertible knower.

- A wrong consciousness apprehends something that does not exist to exist.
- A valid cogniser apprehends the phenomenon in question in the way it exists in reality.

A valid cogniser is the opposite of a wrong consciousness. It is a correct and factually concordant mind.

So to reiterate, we have these two different minds:

1. the apprehension of a self
2. the wisdom realising selflessness.

The apprehension of a self is an erroneous mind that apprehends its object erroneously. Wrong consciousnesses such as the apprehension of a self do not have the support of valid cognition and are a perverted way of looking at things. They do not have truth on their side and are therefore unstable.

The wisdom realising selflessness is a factually concordant mind. The way it apprehends the self is exactly the way in which the self exists in reality. It accords with reality, has a valid support, and is a mind that sees truth as it is. Therefore this valid cogniser can harm and destroy the wrong consciousness.

The apprehension of a self is a wrong consciousness. It is an erroneous knower that engages in its object erroneously. Why? Although there isn't such a self, the apprehension of a self apprehends a self to exist.

The wisdom realising selflessness on the other hand is a valid mind. Just as there isn't a self, the wisdom realising selflessness realises this to be so. Therefore the wisdom realising selflessness is a valid mind and is factually concordant.

When you look at how the wisdom realising selflessness apprehends its object, it apprehends its object in a way that is completely opposite to the apprehension of a self. Because that is so, the wisdom realising selflessness can harm the apprehension of a self.

The more we are accustomed to the understanding of selflessness, our ego-grasping or our apprehension of a self will also become weaker over time. This is something that we have to experience for ourselves. We have to establish whether cultivating this wisdom realising selflessness will lead to the gradual weakening of the apprehension of a self.

Assuming you know that by familiarising yourself with the wisdom realising selflessness our ego-grasping or the apprehension of a self can be weakened, one can then establish logically that, with greater familiarity and by increasing the power of that wisdom realising selflessness, one will be able to completely eradicate the apprehension of a self.

The reason why, “All phenomena are empty and selfless,” is discussed immediately after stating that, “All contaminated phenomena are miserable,” is because there is a solution. If there is no solution, it will be pointless to focus on how contaminated phenomena are miserable.

As mentioned earlier, when you analyse and think about all our problems and unhappiness, they all originate from either anger or attachment. Why does anger and attachment arise in us? There must be something that causes them to arise. When you analyse further, anger and attachment always arises from a very strong sense of a self or “I.” While we have this ego-grasping, this apprehension of a self, when we think about this, we can come to understand that this self that is apprehended by the ego does not exist whatsoever. When we are able to develop the wisdom that sees that such a self does not exist whatsoever, then one will be able to oppose this ego-grasping. In reducing this ego-grasping and finally eliminating it, one will overcome all one’s problems and suffering.

It is very clear when we look at our own experiences, all our problems and unhappiness arise from our mistaken way of relating to reality, i.e., our mistaken way of looking at things and events. Among all the numerous wrong and mistaken conceptions we have about the world and ourselves, the ultimate wrong conception is the strong belief in a self, the apprehension of a self. Through thinking and analysis, we will gradually come to see that the apprehension of a self is the root of all the misconceptions that lead to our suffering and problems.

Can this ego-grasping – this apprehension of a self - be eradicated? Since the apprehension of a self is the root of all our problems and if the root of all our problems and suffering can be eradicated, then suffering would no longer arise. In place of suffering comes peace. Therefore nirvana is peace.

4. Nirvana is peace

Because all phenomena are empty and selfless, therefore nirvana is peace. When we destroy the root of all our problems, our ego-grasping and the apprehension of a self, there and then liberation is achieved. Nirvana means liberation, freedom from all the problems and suffering.

Nirvana is not established from outside. Nirvana is established on the basis of our minds. Come the time when we eradicate the root of all our problems - the ego-grasping from our mind - there and then, nirvana is achieved. In the absence of ego-grasping, there will be no more problem and sufferings. Obviously then there is peace.

The permanent, unitary, and independent self

Selflessness means absence of a particular self. When we say all phenomena are empty and selfless, what is that self that does not exist?

In the context here, such a self is accepted by all the Buddhist tenets. The self referred to here is a permanent, unitary, and independent self. All Buddhist tenets accept that a self that is permanent, unitary, and independent does *not* exist whatsoever.

When you look at most of the non-Buddhist tenets, the majority of them assert that there is a permanent, unitary, and independent self (commonly known as a soul). They are not making this claim without thinking it through and believing it to be so without a reason. They do have their own reasoning and their own way of looking at things.

Among many non-Buddhist tenets, there are some who also assert reincarnation. These proponents of non-Buddhist tenets who assert reincarnation are trying to figure out who or what is the thing that goes on from life to life. To them there must be a self that moves from life to life. Obviously they must then be able to explain what moves from life to life. They are not going to say that the body is the self because it is clear that the body is left behind.

These proponents of non-Buddhist tenets who assert reincarnation come up with the idea that the self or the soul that moves from life to life must be something that is unrelated to the body, i.e., completely independent of the body. They assert that this self/soul that moves from life to life is completely unrelated to the body and it is also unchanging.

- For them they see this self to be permanent, i.e., unchanging.
- Similarly they assert that this self is unitary, which means that it is not constituted of parts, i.e., it is partless.
- Independent means that its existence is independent of causes and conditions. So such a self is permanent, unitary, and independent.

Why do they assert that the self is completely unrelated to the body? This is because they do not know how to posit a self that has the same entity as the body. Therefore they come up with the explanation that the self is permanent, unitary, and independent. However, according to Buddhism, such a self does not exist whatsoever.

As I mentioned earlier, who is a person who propounds Buddhist tenets? The proponent of Buddhist tenets is:

- a Buddhist
- someone who accepts the Three Jewels to be their objects of refuge
- someone who also accept the four seals

There are four divisions of proponents of Buddhist tenets:

1. The proponents of the Great Exposition
2. The proponents of the Sutra
3. The proponents of the Mind Only
4. The proponents of the Middle Way

You must memorise these four divisions of proponents of Buddhist tenets.

Why are there four divisions of proponents of Buddhist tenets? This is related to

the three turnings of the Wheel of Dharma. From one point of view, the Buddha turned the Wheel of Dharma three times.

The proponents of Buddhist tenets can also be divided into:

- The proponents of Hinayana tenets
- The proponents of Mahayana tenets

In the first turning of the Wheel of Dharma, the Buddha taught that all things are truly established. You will find these teachings in the tenets of the Great Exposition School (GES) and the Sutra School (SS). The proponents of the GES and SS are proponents of the Hinayana tenets. The intended trainees for the first turning of the Wheel of Dharma are those who are propounding the Hinayana tenets, specifically the proponents of the GES and SS. The Buddha taught in such a way in order to fit their dispositions.

In the second turning of the Wheel of Dharma, the Buddha taught that all phenomena are not truly established. The intended trainees for the second turning of the Wheel of Dharma are the proponents of the Middle Way School (MWS). The proponents of the MWS are proponents of the Mahayana tenets.

In the third turning of the Wheel of Dharma, the Buddha then differentiated between what is truly established and what is not truly established. In the third turning of the Wheel of Dharma, the Buddha said that:

- thoroughly established natures and other-powered natures are truly established
- imputed natures are not truly established

The intended trainees for the third turning of the Wheels of Dharma are those who propound the tenets of the Mind Only School (MOS).

When you look at this, it is likely that the followers of the four tenets already existed during the three turnings of the Wheel of Dharma.

In the explanations of the GES and SS, there is an explanation of their way of asserting objects and object-processors (or mind). We already looked at this in the previous module when we studied the divisions of objects and consciousnesses. Therefore, in this module, I will not go into details with regard to the way of asserting objects and object-processors. When there are some pertinent points, I will bring them up. Otherwise the emphasis will be on looking at the various different tenets, their views on selflessness and their explanations of the different paths and grounds.

The teachings will be based on the root text, so you should read the text. If there is something that you are not sure of, are unclear about, or you do not understand, you should bring it up in class.

I mentioned in the previous class that this topic is not easy. It is challenging. Besides their meanings, you have to grapple with many new terminologies. But you should not lose heart. You should keep at it and it will become easier as you go along. As I said, it takes time so for the next one, two, three months you just have to work at it. From your side, you have to work at it and put in the effort. Read the text, do not miss classes and participate in the discussions. If you do all this, then at the end of this module, you will definitely learn something.

Whatever understanding you gain will form the basis for you to be able to better appreciate the teachings of the great lamas such as His Holiness the Dalai Lama. When you have some grounding by studying some of these subjects, when you attend His Holiness' teachings, you will better appreciate them as they will sound more familiar to you.

This is just one of the many reasons why we are learning tenets. We believe in future lives, so by studying and learning now, we will plant imprints in our minds. With such imprints, we will improve and get better from life to life. Sooner or later, we will bring our understanding and knowledge to culmination and, on that basis, we will be able to generate the experiences and realisations of the path. Along the way, we will be able to eliminate many of our obscurations and negativities. It is a very long-term thing. By reminding yourself how fortunate you are and how you are accumulating virtue and merit along the way, you then generate enthusiasm and joy for having the opportunity to engage in these studies. Therefore you must come to class with enthusiasm and a sense of joy.

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