

Transcript of teachings by Khen Rinpoche Geshe Chonyi

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Lesson No: 4

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In general, how do we know whether something exists or not? If the particular object in question is suitable to be realised or known by a valid cogniser, then that object is an existent. This is what determines whether something exists or not. If it can be realised by a valid cogniser, it is an existent.

According to the first of the four Buddhist tenets, the Great Exposition School (GES), existents are divided into two:

1. permanent things
2. impermanent things

Permanent things

Only the Proponents of the Great Exposition assert permanent things. The proponents of the other Buddhist tenets do not assert permanent things.

The GES's understanding of things is similar to the other Buddhist tenets. How do they define a thing? Their definition of a thing is that which is able to perform a function. In that sense, the definition is the same. But the Proponents of the Great Exposition go one step further by asserting that permanent things can perform functions as well.

Examples of permanent things are uncompounded space, analytical cessations, and non-analytical cessations (Page 2).

According to the GES, uncompounded space is an illustration of a permanent thing. Uncompounded space is permanent because it does not undergo momentary change. Therefore, according to this school, uncompounded space is also a thing. A thing is that which is able to perform a function, so according to the GES, uncompounded space performs the function of allowing movement to take place within it, of allowing things to be moved within it.

Analytical cessations are permanent cessations or abandonment of any of the afflictions that come through the force of the correct antidote, i.e., the wisdom directly perceiving selflessness. In this school such analytical cessations are also things. You must remember the definition of a thing - that which is able to perform a function. In this case, according to the GES, analytical cessations are permanent things. This means they are also able to perform a function. How is

this so? Analytical cessations perform the function of ceasing or stopping the afflictions, i.e., once the afflictions are abandoned, they are prevented from occurring again. This is the function of analytical cessations.

Non-analytical cessations are also the ceasing or stopping of something. But this factor of abandonment or cessation does not come about through the force of an antidote. Rather it comes about through the temporary absence of the condition for the production of that particular phenomenon. For example, the horns of a goat do not grow on our heads because of the absence of the causes for their production. The fact that the horns of a goat will not grow on our heads is not due to the force of an antidote that ensures its complete non-production whatsoever. It is because, for now, there is the absence of the causes for their production on our heads. That factor of the non-production of the goat's horns on our heads is a non-analytical cessation.

There is also the temporary abandonment or cessation of afflictions due to achieving the concentrations of the form and formless realms through cultivating and meditating on the aspects of coarseness, i.e., by looking at the level beneath it as coarse and by looking at the next level to be finer.

When one's mind is at the concentrations of the form and formless realms, one abandons the afflictions temporarily at those respective levels. That temporary abandonment of the afflictions is not due to the force of the antidotes but due to an absence of the conditions for the afflictions to manifest or arise.

My purpose of explaining this to you is for you to understand why only this Buddhist tenet asserts that there are permanent things. As long as you understand why this is so, I think that is sufficient.

All phenomena are substantially established¹

According to the Proponents of the Great Exposition, all phenomena are substantially established. Why do they have this world view? Because for them, when they look at things or events or anything that exists, there must be something from the side of the object, i.e., there is a substance behind every phenomenon. That is why we talk about substantiality.

According to this school, without this substantiality from the side of the object, things cannot exist. Therefore, for them, anything that exists is necessarily substantially established. This is the world view of the GES: Anything that exists is necessarily substantially established.

The next tenet, the Sutra School (SS), the one above that, the Mind Only School (MOS), and the one above that, the Autonomy Middle Way School (AMWS), all of them do not assert that all phenomena are substantially established. For the SS, the MOS, and the AWMS, for something to be substantially established, the phenomenon in question must first be a composed or impermanent phenomenon whereas for the GES, everything is necessarily substantially established.

Do you see the progression of the views?

¹ Refer to page 183 in *Cutting Through Appearances*.

For the first school, the GES, every phenomenon, whether it be permanent or impermanent, is necessarily substantially established.

Then what about the next school, the SS, then the MOS, and the AMWS? For the next three schools, the SS, the MOS, and the AMWS, not everything is substantially established. Only impermanent or composed phenomena are substantially established.

For the highest school, the Consequence Middle Way School (CMWS), it does not matter whether it is an impermanent phenomenon or a permanent phenomenon. For them, *all* phenomena are *not* substantially established.

This will become clearer and clearer as we move along.

Earlier on, in this school (the GES), we saw how objects of knowledge or existents are divided into permanent and impermanent things. Another way of dividing objects of knowledge or existents is into:

1. conventional truths
2. ultimate truths

Conventional truth²

The definition of the conventional truth is given in Vasubandhu's *Treasury of Manifest Knowledge* (Skt. *Abhidharmakosa*). The definition of a conventional truth is a phenomenon such that an awareness apprehending it is cancelled if it is broken up or mentally separated into its individual parts.

According to the GES, an illustration of a conventional truth is a vase. Why is a vase a conventional truth? A vase is made up of many parts and many factors coming together to make a vase. When the causes and conditions come together, then a vase is established. In that sense, its existence is imputed. If the vase is destroyed, smashed, or broken, the valid cogniser apprehending that vase ceases to exist.

A vase is not an enduring thing. It is not there all the time. In that sense, it is not an ultimate. In that sense, it is not real and is not the truth. Therefore the vase is a conventional truth.

According to this school, a conventional truth and an imputed existent are synonymous, i.e., whether you call it a conventional truth or an imputed existent, it has the same meaning. It is good to understand the meaning of "conventional" in this context and the reason why it is an imputed existent. The vase is an existent that comes about because of the gathering of many factors. It has to be something that is a flat-based, bulbous, and so forth.

Any other phenomenon whose mode of existence is different from the definition of the conventional truth is an ultimate truth. As the *Abhidharmakosa* states, "Others exist as ultimate [truths]."

There are many examples given in the text to illustrate conventional truths.

² Refer to "The two truths," pages 184-187, in *Cutting Through Appearances*.

One example is a mala or rosary. Assuming a mala has one hundred and eight beads, it is only when all the one hundred and eight beads are strung together that you have a mind apprehending a mala. If you were to start removing each and every single bead, in the end, what you have left is a string and the mind apprehending the mala will be cancelled.

Another illustration of a conventional truth according to this school is a forest. We do not call a single tree a forest. It is only when many trees are located together in a specific geographical area that we call it a forest.

Likewise, an army is made up of many soldiers. We do not call one soldier an army. When you eliminate all the trees or all the soldiers, in the end what is left is not a forest and is not an army. The mind apprehending the forest or the mind apprehending an army will not exist anymore.

You have to understand the GES's assertions of conventional truths and ultimate truths. The illustrations are meant to help you do this.

Ultimate truth

The definition of an ultimate truth is a phenomenon such that an awareness apprehending it is not cancelled if it is broken up or mentally separated into its individual parts.

Illustrations [of ultimate truths] are, for example, directionally partless particles, temporally partless [moments of] consciousness, and uncompounded phenomena (Page 3).

An illustration of an ultimate truth is a directionally partless particle, the smallest particle in existence. According to this school, you cannot make this particle any smaller, you cannot do anything to it, and you cannot destroy it. It will always be there. Therefore, for them, it is real and is an ultimate truth.

Since no one can do anything to destroy this directionally partless particle, that means it will always exist. If it exists, then necessarily there will be a valid cogniser apprehending it. The mind apprehending it also cannot be cancelled in any way. Following the definition of an ultimate truth, this makes the directionally partless particle an ultimate truth.

In this school, as opposed to an imputed existent, an ultimate truth is a substantial existent (or is substantially existent).

Other illustrations of ultimate truths are temporally partless moments of consciousness and uncompounded phenomena. The reason why they are ultimate truths is similar to what I have explained.

Uncompounded space is permanent. It never undergoes change and it is stable. As it is always there, the mind apprehending uncompounded space cannot be cancelled. So it is an ultimate truth. It is real and it is true.

Question from Khen Rinpoche: What about directionally partless particles? Are they permanent or impermanent?

A finger snap is not the smallest moment of time. It can be divided into 120 parts. 1/120th of this finger snap is the smallest unit of time. According to this school, that moment is the smallest unit of time and it is an ultimate truth. According to this school, the smallest unit of time is an ultimate truth whereas the time it takes for one finger snap is a conventional truth.

One way of dividing existents or objects of knowledge is into the two truths:

1. conventional truths
2. ultimate truths

Having said that, if it is an existent, is it necessarily one of the two truths? We talked about conventional truths, ultimate truths, and phenomena that are mutually inclusive with them:

- conventional truths are mutually inclusive with imputed existents
- ultimate truths are mutually inclusive with substantial existents

Questions from Khen Rinpoche:

- What is a person?
- Is a person substantially existent or imputedly existent?
- Is a person an ultimate truth or a conventional truth?
- What are the five aggregates - form, feeling, discrimination, compositional factors, and consciousness?

(Response from student).

If you say that a person is an imputed existent, then you will also have to say that these five aggregates are imputedly existent. The consciousness is also an imputed existent but isn't the consciousness an ultimate truth?

According to this system, consciousness is an ultimate truth or conventional truth?

(Response from student).

The mind apprehending consciousness can never be cancelled. The mind apprehending a person can never be cancelled. Then that makes a person an ultimate truth.

Does that not mean that no matter what you do, the person can never cease to exist? Can the mind apprehending a person cease to exist? Can a person cease to exist or not? Then what is it that goes from life to life?

If the person will always exist, it follows that the mind apprehending the person necessarily exists. Then, according to the definition, the mind apprehending the person is not cancelled and that fulfils the definition of an ultimate truth. So the person cannot be destroyed.

(Response from student)

We have seen the definitions and the illustrations of both conventional truths and ultimate truths. Based on that, think about a person. Can a person cease to exist or not? You cannot destroy a person because the person is always there. If it exists, then the mind apprehending that person can never be cancelled. That

being the case, that makes the person an ultimate truth. It follows that the person is substantially existent. Likewise, you would also have to say that the aggregates such as form, feeling, discrimination, compositional factors, and consciousness are also ultimate truths and substantially existent.

Question from Khen Rinpoche: Is the aggregate of form an ultimate truth or a conventional truth? Won't you have to say it is an ultimate truth?

Let us talk about the aggregate of form. The aggregate of form is a category that contains many things. The aggregate of form cannot be destroyed. Is it right to say this? Can the aggregate of form be destroyed or cease to exist?

(Response from student)

Isn't the directionally partless particle form?

All compounded or composed phenomena are included in the five aggregates. If that is the case, won't a directionally partless particle have to be one of the five aggregates? It is clear that it has to go under the aggregate of form. When we think about the aggregate of form, it is not just restricted to the physical form. If you think like that, then it makes the aggregate of form an ultimate truth.

It seems that we have to say that the person is substantially existent. Likewise with the five aggregates, we have to say that they are substantially existent.

Isn't it right to say that the mind apprehending a person can never be cancelled? When you think about it, then you have to say that the person is an ultimate truth and the five aggregates are also ultimate truths.

This is something for you to think about. It is not just a matter of saying "yes" or "no," but arriving at the reason why this is so. If we follow the definition of this school, the essential difference between a conventional truth and an ultimate truth lies in whether the mind apprehending the phenomena in question can be cancelled or not.

Khen Rinpoche: Do you accept that? You must be clear about that.

The mind apprehending a directionally partless particle can never be cancelled. Why? It is due to the fact that the directionally partless particle is the smallest form. The smallest atomic particle in existence cannot be destroyed. It is always there. Since it cannot be destroyed, then the mind apprehending it cannot be cancelled. Therefore, according to the definition, that makes the directionally partless particle an ultimate truth.

Based on this understanding, if someone were to ask you, "Is a person imputedly existent or substantially existent?," what would you say?

The person is imputed in dependence upon any of the five aggregates. Ultimately the person is that which is imputed in dependence upon any of the five aggregates. If you think about the person, will it cease to exist? It is not possible.

We said the person is imputed in dependence upon any of the five aggregates. So the person is not the body. The person moves from life to life, achieves liberation,

and moves on to enlightenment. There will never be a time when the person ceases to exist. Won't we then have to say that the person is substantially existent? It is the same with the main minds, consciousnesses, feelings, or the mental factor of discrimination.

Now the question is: Why would you say that the person is imputedly existent? If you go by this definition, it has to be substantially existent, isn't that so? But most of you say it is imputedly existent. Why do you cling on to the idea that the person is imputedly existent?

(Response from student)

If you think about it, it seems that you would have to say that the person is substantially existent. Likewise, consciousness and the mental factors such as feeling, discrimination, mental attention, and contact are substantially existent.

What about water? According to this system, is water an ultimate truth or a conventional truth?

You should be able to give the answer right away by saying, "Yes, water is conventionally existent," as I had already given you the illustrations of a vase and water as conventional truths in the previous lesson.

Water is a conventional truth, a person is an ultimate truth and the aggregates are ultimate truths. You have to think about this.

In this school, there are also the divisions into:

1. matter – all forms
2. consciousness – main minds and mental factors
3. non-associated compositional factors

When form is divided, there are (1) external form and (2) internal form. There is also one additional category, (3) the non-revelatory form:

- external forms are form, sound, smell, taste, and touch.
- internal forms are the eye sense power, ear sense power, nose sense power, tongue sense power, and body sense power that are included in the continuum of a person

The Proponents of Great Exposition also assert that there is a non-revelatory form. For example, at the motivational phase, be it of a virtuous or non-virtuous action, before an action is carried out or expressed physically or verbally, there is an intention, "I am going to do this." According to this school, that is a form that is not perceptible to the naked eye, but nonetheless it is a form and it is classified as a non-revelatory form.

According to the GES's world view of things and events, all phenomena that exist are necessarily substantially established, i.e., from the side of the object, there is a substance, there is something there. For them, it is the same as saying all things are truly established. According to this school, everything that exists is substantially established and truly established.

While all things are necessarily substantially established, it doesn't mean that everything is true because, in order for something to be true, the mind

apprehending it can never be cancelled. That makes only ultimate truths true. Conventional truths are false.

According to this school, all phenomena are substantially established or truly established, because it has the world view that, in order for anything to exist, it is insufficient to have a consciousness merely imputing that object. There must also be something there from the side of that the object, a substance. There must be something substantial about the object in question. If there is no substantiality in the object, then just having a mind imputing something cannot cause that object to exist. This school does not know how to posit the existence of things and events to be merely imputed by the consciousness. To this school, there has to be something from the side of the object; there is substance. Therefore their world view is that for anything that exists, it is necessarily truly or substantially established.

For our purposes here, as long you can understand what the two truths are based on some illustrations, and if you are able to figure out why water is a conventional truth and uncompounded space is an ultimate truth in this system, then I think you have got it. According to this school, we have to say that uncompounded space is true and water is false. These illustrations are meant to help us understand what conventional truth and ultimate truth means in this school.

If you remember our earlier discussion on what defines a proponent of Buddhist tenets, a proponent of Buddhist tenets is a Buddhist who accepts the four seals. The four seals are the four features that attest to a particular doctrine to be Buddhist. The four seals are:

1. All composed phenomena are impermanent.
2. All contaminated things are miserable.
3. All phenomena are empty and selfless.
4. Nirvana is peace.

All proponents of Buddhist tenets assert that there isn't a self that is permanent, unitary, and independent. In interpreting the third seal, "All phenomena are empty and selfless," most scholars say that that statement is talking about the emptiness or lack of a permanent, unitary, and independent self. While there are many scholars who make this assertion, there are some scholars who assert that the third seal has to be understood in terms of the lack of a self-sufficient substantially existent person.

The reason why there is this differing interpretation of the third seal is related to the subdivisions of the GES. Under the GES, there are four main schools that can be further divided into eighteen subdivisions. Seventeen of these eighteen subdivisions assert the selflessness of persons. One of the subdivisions known as the followers of Vatsiputra (or the Vatsiputriyas) asserts a self of persons.

In some sutras, the Buddha actually said that there is a self of persons. Therefore there are some followers who felt the need to assert a self of persons. So the Vatsiputriyas assert a self of persons, i.e., a self of persons that is self-sufficient substantially existent. But these Vatsiputriyas do not assert that there is a self that is permanent, unitary, and independent.

Due to these assertions of the Vatsiputriyas, some scholars therefore said that the Vatsiputriyas are not Buddhists from the perspective of their view since they assert a self-sufficient substantially existent person. However there are other scholars who assert that the Vatsiputriyas are Buddhists even from the perspective of their view because they do not assert a self that is permanent, unitary, and independent.

When you understand the third seal, “All phenomena are empty and selfless,” to mean that there isn’t a permanent, unitary, and independent self, then these Vatsiputriyas would fit in nicely. So they are Buddhists. Therefore the third seal, “All phenomena are empty and selfless,” has to be understood as saying that the permanent, unitary, and independent self does not exist.

As to what is a self of persons vs. the selflessness of persons and, in this context, what exactly does a self that is permanent, unitary and independent mean, what exactly is the selflessness of persons, what is the meaning of the emptiness of a self-sufficient substantially existent person, and so forth, these points will be discussed in the next lesson.

Question: Do all the four tenets assert that the non-revelatory form is mutually inclusive with the phenomenon source form?

Answer: It is clear in the text that both the GES and the CMWS assert a non-revelatory form. The terminology, the non-revelatory form, does not seem to appear in the assertions of the SS, the MOS and the AMWS.

Question: If one takes the person to be substantially established, can one say that that has to do with the generality of a person? Both the person of the current life and the person of a future lives exist as a generality whereas the instance or particular of a person of the current life does not exist as a person of the future life. Therefore the instances of a person exist as a conventional truth. That also correlates to the aggregates.

Khen Rinpoche: The question that I posted earlier about the person refers to the person in general. Of course, the person in general would seem to be substantially existent. When we talk about a specific person, let’s say, the person of this life, whether we can say it is substantially existent or not, that is something to be analysed.

Likewise with feeling. Feeling in general is substantially existent. When we talk about feelings over a specific period of time, for example, feeling happy for an hour or a day, then it is only limited to that hour and it then ceases to exist. If it ceases to exist, then that feeling of a specific unit of time cannot be a substantial existent.

The feeling of today can cease to exist. When it ceases to exist, the mind apprehending it will also cease to exist, i.e., it can be cancelled. Therefore that makes the feeling of one day to be a conventional truth. If you want to analyse further, what about pleasant feelings, unpleasant feelings, and neutral feelings, especially bliss. In this system, is the feeling of bliss a conventional truth or an ultimate truth?

For our purposes, as long as you get an idea of why in this system certain things are conventional truths while others are ultimate truths, then that is all you need, because in order to get an idea, you have to understand what exactly a conventional truth and an ultimate truth is. Why do you need this understanding? Because when you progress to the next tenet, the higher view, they will have a different explanation and then you will be able to understand that it is a progression.

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