

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: 6

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When we talk about the self, person, or “I,” it is this self, person, or “I” that wants to be happy, who doesn’t want problems and suffering. It is obvious that there is a self, person, or “I.”

But when we investigate the nature of this self, person, or “I,” i.e., exactly what this self is, then the four Buddhist tenets have their own explanations as to what exactly this self, person, or “I” is. In particular, for those of us who assert past and future lives, i.e., those of us who believe in reincarnation, then it is even more important to find out exactly what is this person or “I” that moves from life to life. We believe that there is a self, person, or “I” that moves from life to life and it is this self, person, or “I” who accumulates karma and experiences the results of the karma accumulated.

Leaving aside Buddhists, even the non-Buddhists who assert reincarnation also have to account for the person or “I” who moves from life to life. Many of them have thought about this and, based on their own conclusions, they come to believe that there is a self or “I” that is permanent, unitary, and independent. For them, this is the only way to express the self or “I”: There is a self or “I” who moves from life to life. Then this self, the soul, or person has to be permanent, unitary, and independent. This is the position of many of the non-Buddhist schools. However Buddhism refutes the existence of such a permanent, unitary, and independent self.

Many of the non-Buddhist schools that believe in reincarnation assert that there is a person that is permanent, unitary, and independent. They say that the self or person is completely distinct from the body and mind, i.e., it is a completely separate or different entity from the body and mind. The self is completely unrelated to and not dependent on the body and mind.

These non-Buddhist schools do not know how to relate the self to the body and mind. They are unable to posit a self, person, or “I” that is dependent on the body and mind. They cannot figure out how the self, person, or “I” can be related to, dependent on, or be of the same entity as the body and mind.

We are now looking at the proponents of the Buddhist tenets, starting from the proponents of the Great Exposition School (GES) all the way up to the Consequence Middle Way School (CMWS). All the proponents of the Buddhist tenets are the same in asserting that a permanent, unitary, and independent self

does not exist whatsoever. They assert unanimously that there cannot be an “I” that is not dependent on the body and mind, i.e., there isn’t a person or “I” that is of a different entity from the body and mind.

6 Way of asserting selflessness

Subtle selflessness and subtle selflessness of persons are asserted to be equivalent.

A selflessness of phenomena is not accepted because it is accepted that if it is an established base it is necessarily a self of phenomena.

Among them, the Followers of Vatsiputra, [one of the eighteen sub-schools,] accept a selflessness of person that is [a person] being empty of being permanent, unitary, and independent. However, they do not accept a selflessness of person that is [a person] being empty of being self-sufficient substantially existent because they accept a self-sufficient substantially existent self that is inexpressible even in terms of being one entity with or a different entity from the aggregates, and being permanent or impermanent (Page 6) .

All the four Buddhist tenets are similar in asserting the non-existence of the permanent, unitary, and independent self.

Position of the Vatsiputriyas

Here we are looking at the way the GES asserts selflessness. There are many divisions in the GES. One of these sub-divisions is called the Followers of Vatsiputra. Being proponents of Buddhist tenets, they also do not assert a permanent, unitary, and independent self.

However, this particular sub-school, the Followers of Vatsiputra, does assert a self-sufficient substantially existent person. These Vatsiputriyas do not know how to posit a person that is of the same entity with the body and mind. For them, if the person or “I” is of the same entity with the body and mind, they find it difficult to explain reincarnation. Perhaps they do not know how to explain how this “I” then moves from life to life.

At the same time they cannot *not* assert that the “I” is of the same entity with the body and mind because the Buddha taught in some sutras that the “I” is of the same entity with the body and mind, i.e., there isn’t an “I” that is of a different entity from the body and mind. So they say that this self-sufficient substantially existent person exists but it is neither one entity with nor a different entity from the aggregates. As they find it difficult to assert a person that is of the same entity with the body and mind, therefore they accept that there is “a self-sufficient substantially existent self that is inexpressible even in terms of being one entity with or a different entity from the aggregates.”

The Vatsiputriyas also find it difficult to say that the self is permanent or impermanent. Therefore they say that the self is inexpressible even in terms of being permanent or impermanent.

The Vatsiputriyas, who are a sub-division of the GES, are the only proponents of Buddhist tenets who assert a self-sufficient substantially existent person, whereas the other sub-divisions of the GES and the proponents of the other

Buddhist tenets such as the Sutra School (SS), the Mind-Only School (MOS), and the Autonomy Middle Way School (AMWS) assert that the self-sufficient substantially existent person does not exist whatsoever.

We claim that the self cannot be permanent, cannot be unitary, and cannot be independent. It is important to know why the self or the person cannot be permanent, cannot be unitary, and cannot be independent. This is something we have to think about. The concept of a permanent, unitary, and independent self is referred to as atman or soul in some other religions. Such a self is asserted by many non-Buddhist philosophies and non-Buddhist religions. This is in contrast to what the Buddha taught. In Buddhism, we say that such a soul or self does not exist whatsoever.

Coarse selflessness of persons

We always hear about selflessness and that there isn't a self in Buddhist teachings. For the sake of simplicity, we can take this to mean that the Buddha taught that a permanent, unitary, and independent self does not exist. We can take the non-existence of the permanent, unitary, and independent self to be the coarse selflessness of persons.

We also talk about the non-existence of the self-sufficient substantially existent person. This is the subtle selflessness of persons, according to the GES, the SS, the MOS, and the AMWS. The non-existence of the self-sufficient substantially existent person is the subtle selflessness of persons asserted by all Buddhist tenets, with the exception of the CMWS. The CMWS has a different presentation of the subtle selflessness of persons.

SELF OF PERSON AND PHENOMENA

SCHOOL	COARSE SELF OF PERSONS	SUBTLE SELF OF PERSONS	COARSE SELF OF PHENOMENA	SUBTLE SELF OF PHENOMENA
Great Exposition school	A permanent, single and independent person	A self-sufficient person	None	None
Sutra school	A permanent, single and independent person	A self-sufficient person	None	None
Mind Only school	A permanent, single and independent person	A self-sufficient person	None	Object and subject as different entities; Phenomena as naturally bases of engagement / referent of names
Yogic Autonomy Middle Way school	A permanent, single and independent person	A self-sufficient person	Object and subject as different entities	Truly existent phenomena
Sutra Autonomy Middle Way school	A permanent, single and independent person	A self-sufficient person	None	Truly existent phenomena
Consequence Middle Way school	A self-sufficient person	An inherently existent person	None	Inherently existent phenomena other than persons

- What is the problem when we say that self or “I” is permanent? Why doesn't such a permanent self exist?
- Why isn't there a unitary person? Why can't there be a self that is unitary?
- Why can't there be a person or an “I” that is independent?

In Buddhist tenets, there is this assertion that the permanent, unitary, and

independent self does not exist. We should be able to explain why this is so.

A permanent self

If we were to assert that the self is permanent, that means the self, the person, or “I” is unchanging. But we have to be able to posit a self or person that experiences happiness and suffering. If we assert that the self or person is permanent, how then do we explain that there is a self that experiences happiness and suffering? If the “I” is permanent, i.e., the “I” is unchanging, how does it experience happiness and suffering? If the person or “I” does not change, how does the “I” achieve liberation? How can the person achieve enlightenment?

An independent self

If you were to assert that there is an “I” that is independent, in this context, independence means being independent of causes and conditions. You then have to be able to explain how such an “I” that is independent of causes and conditions exists. You should be able to account for an “I” that is independent of causes and conditions. For Buddhists, it is extremely difficult to account for an “I” that is independent of causes and conditions.

An unitary self

We Buddhists assert that there is no soul. So there is no permanent self, no unitary self, and no independent self. The fact that the self is not permanent and is not independent is quite straightforward. What about the self that is not unitary, i.e., the self possesses parts? What is the problem when we say the self is unitary, i.e., it is partless?

According to the GES, a partless moment of consciousness and partless particles exist. So what is wrong with saying that a partless self exists? According to the GES, the self, the person, or the “I,” are truly established and is an ultimate truth. According to the GES, the self, the person, or the “I” is not a phenomenon whereby an awareness apprehending it is cancelled when it is mentally separated into its individual parts. This means that it is not a conventional truth. It is an ultimate truth and is substantially existent. There is an “I” that has to come from previous lives, in fact from beginningless lifetimes up to now, and there is an “I” that moves on from this life to the next life.

According to the GES, such an “I” is truly existent. If you think about this, one would probably have to say that the self, the person, or the “I” is an ultimate truth.

In this system, if it is an ultimate truth, is it necessarily partless? If it is a partless phenomenon such as a directionally partless particle, it is necessarily an ultimate truth.

But if it is an ultimate truth, is it necessarily partless? In this discussion, it seems that we would have to say that the self, the person, or the “I” is an ultimate truth in this system. Yet we cannot say that the self, the person, or the “I” is partless.

The main thing here is to explain why the self, the person, or the “I” cannot be partless. Being a proponent of Buddhist tenets, you cannot claim that there is a soul. In this case, the soul is partless or unitary. What is the problem with saying that the self is partless? This is something to be discussed further.

In short, in Buddhism, a permanent, unitary, and independent self, a soul or atman does not exist whatsoever. The non-existence of such a self is the coarse selflessness of persons. You have to memorise what is the coarse selflessness of persons. For now, you just need to remember that a permanent, unitary, and independent self does not exist whatsoever.

On the basis of remembering that the coarse selflessness of persons means the non-existence of a permanent, unitary, and independent self, then think, “What is the problem with saying that the person is permanent? What is the problem with saying that the person is unitary? What is the problem with saying the person is independent?”

By thinking about these points, using many reasons, you will then come to an ascertainment: “The person cannot be permanent because of this and that” That kind of understanding constitutes an understanding of the coarse selflessness of persons.

When we look at our own experience of looking at ourselves, we have this strong belief inside us that the “I” of yesterday and the “I” of today is exactly the same person. Nothing has changed. There is this appearance of a permanent or unchanging “I,” a person that is so real. We believe that to be the case.

But such a permanent self or “I” does not exist. Although we have this appearance of an “I” that has not changed over time - the “I” of yesterday and the “I” of today being exactly the same - in reality, the “I” has changed because the “I” is not permanent. The “I” of yesterday does not exist now. The “I” of yesterday has already ceased and disintegrated. In that sense the “I” has changed.

This is nothing very special. It is just coarse impermanence, not subtle impermanence. Having said that, even if we just had this understanding of coarse impermanence, that the “I” of yesterday has already ceased and the new “I” now is not the “I” of yesterday, it is very helpful because it can help us to counteract many of our afflictions.

On top of that understanding, we can come to an understanding that we are, in fact, undergoing change in every single moment, down to the smallest moment of time. When we understand that the “I” does not exist for even a single moment and changes from moment to moment, that constitutes the real understanding of subtle impermanence. That understanding can then really help in counteracting our afflictions, the three mental poisons.

The “I” does not exist for more than the smallest unit of time. In each and every single moment, it is different. That is the reality but that reality does not appear to us. What appears to us instead is the unchanging “I” that remains the same.

When we realise the non-existence of the permanent, unitary, and independent self, that realisation is very helpful in counteracting our coarse afflictions, i.e., our coarse anger, our coarse attachment, and our coarse ignorance.

The non-existence of the permanent, unitary, and independent self is the coarse selflessness of persons. After that comes the subtle selflessness of persons, i.e., the non-existence of the self-sufficient substantially existent person.

You are now at the initial stages of training. You have no choice but to memorise these terms. It is the basis for you to engage in discussions and to analyse the subject. You have to be able to pick up the terms. You have to be able to say, for example, “the non-existence of the self-sufficient substantially existent person.” That is non-negotiable.

Subtle selflessness of persons

There are four Buddhist tenets and the majority of them starting from the GES up to the AMWS, with the exception of the CMWS, conduct their investigation of the “I” on the basis of asserting that the “I” exists from its own side.

On the basis of that assertion, they then investigate how there isn’t a self-sufficient substantially existent person. In their investigations, they look into the problems if they were to assert that there is a self-sufficient substantially existent person. They focus on that issue.

When we look at our own experience, our own idea of ourselves, i.e., when we look at the person or the “I,” we have this idea, “I am the possessor of the aggregates (or the body and mind).” We have this belief, “I own my body and mind.” “I am the user of my body and mind.”

This worldview of ourselves and how we relate to our own body and mind is similar to the relationship between a businessman or trader and the goods he trades in. We have the idea that we are the businessmen owning the goods to be traded. In this case, the goods to be traded are our body and mind. We are like the owner of the body and mind. This belief that the self, the person, or the “I” is the owner of the body and mind is innate, arises naturally, and is not taught.

How do we know we operate in such a way? Imagine a time when we are feeling unwell, especially when we are down with some sickness. When we see someone with a healthy body and who is free of pain, we have this idea, “How nice it will be if I can have that body.” We have this wish to exchange bodies, but not the wish to exchange the self.

Another example: when we see someone who is more attractive or handsome than us, we may have the idea, “How nice it will be if I can have that beautiful body.” We have the wish to exchange our body if given a choice.

This is how we believe the “I” is the owner of the body. The body is like something that can be traded or exchanged, just like what a businessman does with the goods that he owns. He can sell them or exchange them for something better. This is how we think.

It is the same when we look at our mind. We feel that we own our mind. We have different kinds of mind such as our intelligence, our wisdom, and so forth. For someone who is not so intelligent or wise, when he sees a person who is intelligent, he envies that person and thinks, “How wonderful if I can be like him and have his wisdom and intelligence.” He has the wish to exchange his mind if it is possible. Such a wish is innate and is not taught.

In this case, the “I” does not seem to depend on the body and mind whatsoever. Rather we have the idea that it is the body and mind that are dependent on the self. The self, the person, or the “I” is like the owner. We have this idea that the self exists in this way, i.e., that the “I” is not dependent on the body and mind

whatsoever but is the possessor or owner of the body and mind. Such a belief, in philosophical terms, is called the apprehension of a self-sufficient substantially existent person.

A permanent, unitary, and independent self doesn't exist. A person that is the possessor or owner of the body and mind also does not exist.

With regard to a permanent, unitary, and independent self, when we talk about the permanent, unitary, and independent self in this context, we are saying that that self is not dependent on, nor is it related to the body and mind. Thus we say the self is permanent, unitary, and independent. Permanent, unitary, and independent here has the connotation that the self or the "I" is completely unrelated to the body and mind, i.e., there is no relationship between them.

When we talk about the self-sufficient substantially existent person, it is something similar to that but not exactly the same.

When there is an apprehension of a self-sufficient substantially existent person, there is the idea that there is a person or an "I" that is the possessor of the aggregates. In that sense, the person or the "I" is not dependent on the body and mind. In this relationship, the body and mind have some kind of dependence or reliance on the "I."

So there is this slight difference between these two apprehensions: the apprehension of a permanent, unitary, and independent self and the apprehension of a self-sufficient substantially existent person.

It is very important to get an understanding of what we have been discussing. Once you get this right, then there is nothing much else to say about the selflessness of persons. With the exception of the CMWS, the presentation of the selflessness of persons in the GES, the SS, the MOS, and the AMWS are the same.

So for now, what you have to remember is this: All the tenets, with the exception of the CMWS, assert that:

- the non-existence of a permanent, unitary, and independent self is the coarse selflessness of persons
- the non-existence of a self-sufficient substantially existent person is the subtle selflessness of persons

Quite a few non-Buddhist philosophical systems and many other major religious traditions of the world assert a soul or atman. What they are saying essentially is that there is a permanent, unitary, and independent self. They are saying that there is soul or a self that goes to heaven that is completely unrelated to the body and mind, i.e., that is separate from the body and mind and is of a different entity from the body and mind.

All Buddhist tenets say unanimously that such a soul does not exist whatsoever. A self that is completely unrelated to the body and mind and that is of a different entity from the body and mind does not exist. The non-existence of this self is the coarse selflessness of persons. In this case, when we say, selflessness of persons, we are referring to the coarse selflessness of persons. The word, "selflessness," means the lack of or the non-existence of a self. In this context, it

is the self that is permanent, unitary, and independent. Such a self does not exist. The non-existence of such a self is called the coarse selflessness of persons.

It is easy to say this but it is not easy to gain an ascertainment of or conviction about this. You have to prove to your own mind that the person is not permanent, that the person is not unitary, and that the person is not independent.

You have to think and ask yourself, “What is the problem when I say the “I” is permanent? What is the problem if the “I” is partless? What is the problem if the “I” is independent?” This is something that you have to work at by thinking about it and through discussion.

As long as you are able to get an understanding in your heart that such a self does not exist, I think that is sufficient. If you are able to arrive at an understanding of this through such a process of reasoning, then you can say, “I have gained an understanding of the coarse selflessness of persons.”

The non-existence of the self-sufficient substantially existent person is subtler than the non-existence of the permanent, unitary, and independent self because the object of negation is subtler. This means that it is more difficult to understand.

To be able to say we know the apprehension of the self-sufficient substantially existent person, we have to look at our own experience and see how such a mind operates. What is this mind thinking when it apprehends the person to be like the owner or possessor of the body and mind? How does it work?

When we look at our own experiences, we will be able to see that we innately believe that we are the owner of the body and mind. In this case, it is not that the “I” is completely unrelated to the body and mind, but that the “I” is like the owner or possessor of the body and mind.

The manner of the apprehension is this: the “I” seems not to depend on the body and mind completely. When we look at the body and mind, the body and mind seem to be dependent on the “I.” This particular way of apprehending the “I” can be understood through the examples that were given earlier about how innately we have this wish to exchange our body or mind with somebody else. We believe that there is an “I” that is the owner or possessor of the body and mind. The “I” is independent of the body and mind. That is the meaning of self-sufficient.

Does the “I” exist in the way that we believe it to exist? In this case, we innately believe that:

- there is an “I” that is the owner or possessor of the body and mind
- there is an “I” that is not dependent on the body and mind

There is such an appearance of the “I” and we believe in it.

The question is: Does such an “I” exist in reality? Does the “I” exist in the way it appears to our mind? Is there a self-sufficient person or an “I” that is the owner or possessor of the body and mind, with the owner not depending on the body and mind? The answer is, “No.”

It is one thing to say, “No,” but it is another thing to be able to establish in your heart and mind that such a self-sufficient substantially existent person does not exist. That is another completely different matter.

Question: Can you give an example of an ultimate truth that is partless?

Answer: Directionally partless atom, the shortest moment of consciousness. The examples are given in the root text.

Question: There are intellectually acquired afflictions and innate afflictions. In the case of the apprehension of the self-sufficient substantially existent person, there are two forms:

- the intellectually acquired apprehension
- the innate apprehension

The antidote to these two apprehensions is said to be the same. If that is the case, why do we need to abandon the intellectually acquired apprehension before we can abandon the innate one?

Answer: The mode of apprehension of the intellectually acquired apprehension of the self-sufficient substantially existent person and the mode of apprehension of the innate apprehension of the self-sufficient substantially existent person are different.

To keep it simple, the mode of apprehension of the intellectually acquired apprehension of the self-sufficient substantially existent person is similar to the apprehension of the permanent, unitary, and independent self. What is the intellectually acquired apprehension of the self-sufficient substantially existent person? It is the apprehension of a self that is of a different entity from the aggregates. It is similar to an apprehension of a permanent, unitary, and independent self. The intellectually acquired apprehension of the self-sufficient substantially existent person clings on to the self or an “I” that is of a different entity from the body and mind.

In the case of the innate apprehension of the self-sufficient substantially existent person, this particular mind does not apprehend a self or a person that is of a different entity from the body and mind. Rather it apprehends a self or “I” that is the owner, possessor, or controller of the body and mind. So the modes of apprehension are different.

Here we are comparing two different minds:

1. The intellectually acquired apprehension of the self-sufficient substantially existent person: the mode of apprehension involves apprehending the self or the “I” to be of a different entity from the body and mind.
2. The innate apprehension of the self-sufficient substantially existent person: there is no such apprehension of a self or an “I” that is of a different entity from the body and mind.

This topic is extremely challenging and difficult. It is something we need to work at over years of thinking. There are materials available in English. One can look at them but it is still difficult to decisively say, “This is this and this is not that.” It doesn’t matter whom we are talking about. It is difficult for anyone to say exactly, “It is like this. It is not like that.”

Question: Is the partless particle an ultimate truth and a form at the same time?

Answer: It is not a non-associated compositional factor! It is form. The aggregate of form would be form.

Question: The partless particle that cannot be destroyed is an ultimate truth and at the same time it is form, which is an impermanent thing?

Answer: Yes.

Question: A person is substantially existent; yet, in this school, it says that it is empty of being self-sufficient substantially existent. This sounds a bit contradictory to me. Is it trying to say that the person is substantially existent but not self-sufficient?

Answer: If you remember, according to the GES, if it is an established base, it is necessarily substantially established. This means the person is necessarily substantially established. The person is substantially established but the self-sufficient substantially existent person does not exist. Obviously there is a difference.

In the context of saying that a self-sufficient substantially existent person does not exist, that is to help us understand how we innately view ourselves as being an owner, possessor, or controller of the body and mind. It is not unrelated to the body and mind but it is like an owner of the body and mind.

Let us look at the partless particle. Are partless particles self-sufficient substantially existent? They are substantially established but are they self-sufficient?

Student: Yes.

Khen Rinpoche: So there is self-sufficient substantial establishment.

There is self-sufficient substantial existence. But we say that the self is not self-sufficient substantially existent.

We have to prove or establish that the partless particle is self-sufficient. If the partless particle is self-sufficient, then it would mean¹ [that it does not depend on a previous moment of a partless particle to come about. This would mean that it is permanent. If the partless particle is permanent, then it would not be form as form is necessarily impermanent.]²

Translated by Ven. Tenzin Gyurme

Transcribed by Phuah Soon Ek, Vivien Ng and Patricia Lee

¹ The recording was abruptly cut off at this point.

² This section of the transcript (in brackets) is taken from the notes of a student.

Edited by Cecilia Tsong