

Buddhist View 128: Emptiness

Nov. 30 Class Notes

We have talked about the emptiness of Self and of Phenomena. For one's Self, we attempt to identify the referent for which the word "Self" applies. To see how that ignorance operates, think of a time when you have been wrongly accused. Watch the feeling of "I AM" arise with a feeling of solidity. Then look more closely. Something should be there. Where is the Self? Where does it abide? Is it singular or plural? Is it frozen in time, permanent? Does this Self exist by its own power? Or is it dependent? Can it be completely Self-powered and dependent at the same time? The more we look, the more certain we become the self doesn't exist as it appears to us.

"Don't take my word for it. Be like an explorer, or scientist. Look to see for yourself. Science has given us many ways to analyze the truth. Use science to look and see, where does an Object exist truly? How does the Self exist? Look using your own intelligence." – Khenpo Tsultrim Gyatso, 2004

There are sometimes skeptics who attend teachings who say that nothing really rings true for them. But that kind of critique cannot lead to personal insights. There were skeptics in Buddha's time, and the Buddha warned that a broad, aloof kind of skepticism is an ignorant View – denying the rule of Karma.

If a person has the View that life is as good as can be expected and there's nothing really you can do to improve suffering, then of course, there is no reason to look to Buddhism. Why should he?

However, if a student understands the Four Noble Truths, then he generates appropriate skepticism - a critical analysis of the teachings with skepticism towards those longtime Views which causes problems. – B. Alan Wallace, 2012 (4 Noble Truths seminar)

The Four Vajra Splinters

Background: All the mental afflictions arise from the ignorant view regarding the transitory assembly, and the merely conventionally existent self is the attended object of such ignorance. Ignorance attends to the merely conventionally existent self, which is to be refuted. (Lamrimpa n.d.)

First Vajra Splinter – *What is the source, the cause of any given thing? How does it arise? "If a thing comes from a source at one with itself, from something between itself and the parts which make it up, (...)we find that there is no independent factor which can rightly be designated as the specific source of any phenomenon."*
(Rinpoche 1997)

The only possible ways things really arise –

- A. *Having the Same Nature as its Cause – (replicate itself?)*
- B. *Having a Nature Completely Different from its Cause.*

(The result is not completely same nor different. “If you plant a seed, a plant will grow from the seed; but by the time the plant begins to grow, the seed has already been consumed. So the source and its result are not co-existent. We can never find both the source and the result existing at the same time, which shows that they are distinct from each other). (Rinpoche 1997) If this were not so, then you could get bread from iron.

The idea that conditions arise out of something else is just a very general principle which more or less applies if we take a functional view. But if we examine carefully to find out where exactly this arising is, there is not any specific kind of arising to be discovered. So in practicing the path, if we take a general overall view of the development of the collection of merit and the collection of wisdom, it is said that we must create the collection of merit and that this is the source of realization. - Like a dream, arising appears to function. But in actuality, there is no arising, no abiding and no passing away on the ultimate level. However, karma operates on the functional level BECAUSE things are empty and flexible.

C. Having a Nature Produced Partly from Itself and Partly from a Different Nature. We have already shown that production from self is impossible. And production from something different is impossible. Simply asserting that both happen at the same time doesn't satisfy the previous refutation.

D. Having a Nature Produced from neither Itself nor Anything Else. Arising from no cause whatsoever is an impossible assumption. It's an extreme that obviously sort of magical thinking. A common observation of phenomena shows there is some causal condition and secondary condition involved in bringing about events. Looking at our current lives we learn about our past, past lives, etc.

Second Vajra Splinter – *Examine the results or outcomes* of the various causes “...to see how they came about and what their nature is. In examining the outcome of any given cause, any specific source, we can see that there is no particular truly existent thing which can be designated as the result, but neither is there a mere nothingness, for results are not totally non-existent.” (Rinpoche 1997)

Take the example of the mirror. If something real had to pass from your face to the mirror, if your real face had to enter a mirror before you could see the reflection, reflections in mirrors would not be possible. However, given the appropriate conditions, reflections arise with there being no substantial connection between cause (your face) and effect (the reflection).

Third Vajra Splinter – *Examine the essential quality* of phenomenon to see if it is *one thing or many things*. An essential quality cannot be many things because it would then be just many different things, and not a unitary essential quality at all; nor can it be unitary essential quality at all; nor can it be unitary, for it would then be beyond the experience of the skandas, which are multiple, and therefore unknowable. “ (Rinpoche 1997)

This splinter analysis is said by Shantirakshita to be the best, easiest way to understand emptiness, that is, “by apprehending the intrinsic nature in order to recognize its transcendence of conceptuality.” (Rinpoche 1997)

“It is not necessary to approach the subject from many points of view; from this one perspective we can understand the emptiness of everything – the emptiness of the mind, the emptiness of phenomena, the emptiness of the connection between mind and phenomena. In all contexts, emptiness can be understood from this one point of view. “ (Rinpoche 1997)

Phenomena are Multiple

Consider this essential quality of reality. “We can see that if reality had an essence or an essential quality, this essential quality would have to be either unitary, that is, there would have to be a singular essential quality to everything, or it would have to be multiple. Nothing can be simultaneously unitary and multiple. “
There are only two possibilities that any essential quality be either unitary or multiple.

The Fourth Vajra Splinter – *Recognize the interdependent nature of everything.*

All events, phenomena, etc. occur, not because of their inherent true nature, but rather due to causes and conditions. Nowhere do find anything whatsoever without a cause.

Phenomena have no discoverable essence or real nature, but appear. Like a reflection on a mirror due to causes and conditions. The image in a mirror is not the object.

Lacking “true nature” are not eternal, but instead are impermanent. They are not mere nothing, but in fact arise due to causes and conditions. There is no “real” arising, and so there is no real or absolute extinction. Even a burnt log is transformed into fire and smoke.

This interdependent nature is something like relativity. If we are standing on a hill, the hill we are standing on is the hill over here, and the hill we see in the distance is the hill over there. But if we go over to the other hill, the hill we are standing on is the hill over here, and the hill we were standing on before is the hill over there.

More metaphors:

Can something be intrinsically short? But that is relative depending on what it is compared to. Things therefore cannot have truly existing characteristics such as short or long.

A rope appears in the mind as a snake. You experience what is seen as a truly existent snake. But looking closely, you see the snake is merely a rope. It is an appearance based on either valid or invalid label. Also, it is merely a relative matter of perception. If something looks like a snake, we believe it is a snake. With anger and attachment, this sort of presumption that our reifications are valid is a big problem. It has led to countless errors made over and over, creating the karma to suffer. Now, with the sword of discriminating awareness, we can apply some analysis and determine the validity of appearances, rather than simply accepting them as real.

Union of Appearance Emptiness, The Two Truths

(Gyamtso 1988)
(Lamrimpa n.d.)
(Nagarjuna 1997)
(K. T. Rinpoche 1997)
(T. Rinpoche n.d.)
(Wangduk 2004)

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