

The Far-Reaching Attitude of Wisdom: Part 3 of 3
Establishing the Selflessness of Persons and Phenomena (lightly edited transcript)
by Ven. Thubten Chodron© at Dharma Friendship Foundation, Seattle. 23 Jun 94

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So, last time we were talking about things being labeled. We talked about manners as something created by our societal conditioning and as being merely labeled. Yet we attach another value on to manners besides the mere actions. For instance, maybe somebody is licking their bowl, or they are slurping, that is just an action and just a sound. But we give more meaning to it than is really there and we think the meaning exists inside the object. We then think that these people have really bad manners.

[Our Mind Imputes and Projects Meaning onto Things](#)

Manners

By looking at how we discriminate about good and bad manners, we see how our mind imputes and how our mind projects things onto things. We forget that we are the one projecting things and we think that those things we project have qualities from their own side. For example, when we see somebody slurping or licking their bowl as they do in Tibet and which is a sign of good manners there, we think that the action from its side is a sign of bad manners. But there is no such thing as good manners or bad manners inside the action, because the slurping is just a sound and the licking is just an action. There is no meaning in it aside from the meaning that we as a collective community give it.

Money

We also talked last time about money and how we give all this meaning to money. It represents success. It represents status. It represents approval. But it is merely paper and ink. This is really talking about us giving meaning to things. These are really clear examples of how our mind assigns a quality to a thing that does not have that quality from its own side.

Independent Existence and Inherent Existence

If we look deeply, we see that we impute this kind of existence to things as if they have some kind of essence from their own side. We see things as independently existent, or inherently existent. This means that we see them as having some essence from their own side that makes them “them” and therefore inherently existent, or we see them as some kind of independent something that makes them the unique object that they are, and therefore independently existent.

An Objectively Existing Book?

Everything we perceive in our life, we perceive in this way. We believe things have some kind of characteristic, or essence, in and of themselves. When we walk into a room and see a book, it looks to us as if the book is sitting there and from its own side it is a book. It being a book does not appear to depend on anything. We walk into the room and there on the table is an objectively existing book. We can even measure it as this many inches and that many centimeters. It appears to us that it is a book from its own side and we relate to it as if it has some essence of book-ness to it. We think, “It is a book, it is not a kangaroo, or a napkin, it is a book because it has some essence of book-ness in it.”

If we try and look for this essence, this definable quality that makes it “it” and not something else, if we look for this independent essence of book-ness, then we only have two places to look for it – either within the object, or as something separate. Book-ness must be within the parts, or separate from the

parts. There is no other place that we can find some kind of essence of book besides one of those two places.

Examine the Parts

Then we examine and take the book apart and start looking at each different part of it. As we turn the pages, we cannot say that this page is a book, or that page is a book. The color alone is not the book, the rectangular-ness is not the book. If we took it apart and put all the sheets of paper between the covers all in a different place over there, we would not call any of those papers a book, would we?

So when we try and find one single defining characteristic, or one single part that we can identify as being the book, we cannot find anything. Yet when we look at this thing, it looks like there is a real book there from its own side. But when we look at the parts, we cannot find anything that is a real book.

Some people may say that the whole collection of parts together makes the book. But if none of the parts itself is a book, how can you take a bunch of things that are not books, put them together and get a book? That is like taking a bunch of things that are not apples, putting them together and getting an apple. It doesn't work. So neither can we say that within the collection of parts there is an inherently existent book, because if we look at the parts of the collection, none of them is a book and the collection itself is just something that is made of parts.

Separate from the Basis?

If we look for a book that is inherently existent and separate from the base, that is separate from the covers and the binding and the pieces of paper, then what are we going to point to? Can you find some kind of spiritual book-ness floating around that when finally this thing gets published and bound, then the book-ness sinks into it and radiates 'book' thereafter? There is no such thing. Aside from the paper and cover and things, there is nothing else we can point to as being a book.

When we look for a defining characteristic of book-ness, an essence of book, the book that exists from its own side independent of any other phenomena in the universe, we cannot find that in the parts and we cannot find that separate from the parts. So then the only conclusion we can draw is that it does not exist. There is no kind of book quality, or book essence either within, or without. Our whole way of perceiving this book, the whole way this book appears to us and the whole way our mind grasps onto this book as existing, is a total hallucination, because when we analyze and try to find the thing that appears to us, we cannot find it at all.

A Conventionally Existing Phenomenon

But simply because we cannot find the essence of book does not mean that there is no book that exists whatsoever. There clearly is something here that is a conventionally existing phenomenon, something that functions and something that we use and talk about. We cannot say there is no book, because we use it. There is a book, but it is not an inherently existent book. Rather, it is a dependently arising book and that makes the book empty of inherent existence.

The Ultimate and Conventional Levels of Truth

So we have two things existing simultaneously, the book's emptiness of inherent or independent existence, and its existence as a dependent phenomenon. These two things exist simultaneously together. We call these two things the ultimate level of truth, and the conventional level of truth. The conventional level being that it is a book that depends on causes and conditions, and on parts, and its functions. The ultimate level is that it is completely empty of having any kind of independent essence. These two things come together and one cannot exist without the other. You cannot have a dependently existing book without it being empty of independent existence, and you cannot have the emptiness of independent existence of the book without having a functioning, relatively existent book.

This is quite important, because otherwise people have the tendency to think that emptiness is some kind of ultimate reality that is out there, that emptiness itself is inherently existent. Again this is refuted because when we look for emptiness as something that we can now grasp onto and say we got it, it again eludes us. We cannot find it. Emptiness also exists by being merely labeled and that is all.

False Appearances

Imagine a child who is born wearing sunglasses and therefore, never realizes that they are seeing everything darker, because that is the way things have always appeared to them. It is the same with us.

Things have always appeared to us as inherently existent and we do not realize that we are experiencing a false appearance. We do not realize that our mind is grasping onto something as existing in a way in which it does not exist.

The big difficulty for us is the fact that we do not recognize the false appearance. We do not recognize that the object, the thing that is appearing to us, does not really exist in the way we perceive it. We just assume that everything exists the way it appears to us. It becomes real difficult for us to discern that the element we are projecting, is falsely appearing and does not really exist there. It is only by dedicating a lot of time and really looking over this that we begin to get a feeling for how things really exist.

People Do Not Exist in the Way We Perceive Them

Let us relate this to a person. Think of some person that you really have some very strong emotions for, maybe somebody that you are incredibly fond of and to whom you are much attached. When you look at, or even just think of that person, it seems like there is a real person there, doesn't it? If we walk in a room and look around, there is Steven, Laurie and Kate. They all look like real people who have an essence of Steven-ness and Laurie-ness and Kate-ness coming from their own side. When we meet people, it seems like there is something inside that makes them 'them' and does not make them anybody else. It seems like there is some kind of permanent person, some unchangeable quality, or something that is the person which carries on from one moment to the next.

If we think of a person that we are very fond of, it really appears to us that there is some thing that is 'that' person. The person appears as incredibly wonderful, fantastic, trustworthy and talented, etcetera. They really appear to us as inherently existent. But if we start to analyze and look for the thing that really is that person – it is almost like we are looking for a soul – what is the 'them' that you love so much?

When you look at somebody and say, "I love you so much," what is the 'you' that you love so much? Or when you say, "I hate you so much," what is the 'you' that you hate so much? When we start looking for the 'you' in the person, again, there are only two places to look – either within the body and mind of that person, or as something separate from the body and mind. There is no other place. "Self" has got to either be in there, or it has got to be some place else. There is no third place that can exist.

But when we start looking for that thing that is the person and start looking through all the parts – the body and mind – can we find them? We can scan through their whole body and ask, "Is this person any one part of their body? Is this person their brain, their skin, their eyes, their kidneys, or their little toes?" Is there any one part you can grab onto and say, "that is the person"?

His Holiness and Scientists

There was a conference of some scientists with His Holiness. His Holiness asked a very interesting question. The scientists were saying there is no such thing as mind, there is only the physical body and that is all. So His Holiness said, "If somebody's brain was on the table and their brain was just sitting there, would you look at it and say that it is the person?" We would not, would we? If somebody's brain is sitting there, we would not go, "Hi George!" In fact we might be kind of disgusted, if anything! We certainly would not look at the brain and say, "I love you so much!" [Laughter]

Finding the Person You Love

If we look in any part of the body, we cannot find one part of the person's body that is them and of which we can say is really this wonderful person of whom we are so fond. So we think, "Ah, maybe it is in their mind! It is their mind I love." But again we must ask which part of their mind? Do you love the visual consciousness that sees color and shape? Do you love the auditory consciousness that hears sound? Do you love the gustatory consciousness that tastes, the olfactory consciousness that smells, the tactile consciousness that touches, the consciousness that thinks, the consciousness that sleeps or is it the mental consciousness you love?

Then you say, "Well, maybe it is the mental consciousness that I love." Then we need to ask, which mental consciousness is it that I love? Is it the mental consciousness that is sleeping, the one that is angry, or the one that is dying? Is it the mental consciousness from when they were a baby, or is it the mental consciousness that thinks about mathematics? What mental consciousness do we love?

Then we might think, "Well no, it is not the mental consciousness I love, it is their qualities as a person I love." Which quality of the person do you love? Do you love their happiness? But they are not always

happy. Do you love their anger, or their integrity, or their faith, or compassion? Do you love their laziness or their judgmental-ness? When we start looking at all the different mental factors that arise in the person's mind, again we cannot isolate one of those and say, "That is the person. That is the thing that I love so much."

Of all those mental events, none of them are constant. They come and they go. They come and they go and they are different all the time. If we are looking for this thing that is the person, this essence of the person, it has got to be something that is permanent and unchangeable, because something that is there one minute and gone the next, we cannot say that that is the person. When we look inside their mind, we cannot isolate one particular mental event, or consciousness, or anything at all and say, "That is who that person is, who they always have been and who they always will be. That is them!"

So if the person is not their body and if the person is not their mind, then we think, "The person is separate from the body and mind. The person is some kind of unchanging, permanent soul." But if there is this permanent, unchanging soul, what is it? If it really inherently exists, if it is out there as an objective entity, then when we analyze, investigate and search for it, we should be able to identify something that is it. If you could point to something that's them, that means that their body and mind could be here and they could be over there. Have you ever seen that? The person is here but their body and mind are over there? But what are you going to point to when you take away their body and their consciousness, is there something else there?

Questions and answers

Past Lives and Continuity

[Audience:] What about people who remember their past lives?

That happens because there is a continuity like a river, but the river upstream and the river downstream are not the same thing. The river downstream depends on the river upstream so there is this continuity, but they are not the same thing.

Even if we were not talking about previous lives, we can remember what happened to us when we were four or five years old but what is it that is happening? Is there some kind of permanent person that we were when we were four and that we still are now? Is there some kind of permanent person that we were in our previous lives? There is not. It is simply that there is a continuity that occurs but everything has changed. We are not the same now as we were when we were four. We are not the same now as we were when we were in our previous life, but there is a continuity happening.

[Audience:] Continuity of what?

There is a continuity of similar things that are ever changing. Look at the river. What is that the continuity of? There is something there and what is in it changes all the time. But it is not like there is a solid, existing thing because the banks upstream are not the same as the banks downstream. They are made out of different molecules. Things rub off the bank and get floated down the river.

But again the continuity is not some findable essence either. It is not like there is continuity floating down the river. Continuity is a label we give on the basis of something having a result that we can trace back to a cause. It is simply because there is something here that we can trace back and say it used to be like that then we label 'continuity' on that.

But among all those things that went from there to here, we cannot find any that has not changed. We can even see that what we call 'river' isn't the water, or the banks, or any part of it. 'River' is just a label that we have given on top of all these things that have some relationship to each other. But from its own side, there is no river.

A "Person" Exists by Being Labeled.

So, it is the same way with the person. There are all these different mental events, mental factors and mental consciousness and there is the body. All these things are going along, all are changing, changing, changing, but on top of all those things, we just give the label 'person'. That is why we say

that the person exists by being merely labeled. There is nothing more than a label on top of a basis. Beyond that, you cannot find anything that is the person.

This feels so different to us. We feel, “Hold on, wait a minute, there is something that is ‘me’ inside and there is something inside the other person that is ‘them’.” But when you analyze it, you cannot find the ‘me’, or the ‘them’. That is where we say that the person is empty of inherent existence. But the fact that it is empty of inherent, or independent, existence does not mean that there is no person there at all. There is a person. Who we are and what we are is just a conglomeration of parts that exist because there were the causes. On top of this conglomeration of parts that arose because of causes, we give it a label, attach a name and then we say there is a person.

Karma

[Audience:] Can you explain how karma fits into this?

There is almost a feeling like there is an inherently existent ‘him’ that is the owner of the karma. Kind of like, that is Andrew and he’s holding on to his karma. That is how we think, isn’t it? We think, “This is my karma. There is a ‘me’ and then there is my karma.”

[Audience:] But the karma doesn’t go to somebody else.

That is true and the leaf, once it is floating down this river, does not jump into that other river. But that does not mean that there has got to be an inherently existent person that never changes. If there were an inherently existent person that did not change, then that person could not create karma and could not experience the result of the karma.

To create karma, you change because you have to act. As soon as you act, you are different. But if you are inherently existent, if you are independently existent, it means you are permanent, unchanging and static. It would be impossible for you to change. In the same way, if there were such a solid person, who would it be that would experience the result of the karma? Because again, when you experience the result, you change.

A Permanent ‘You’?

[Audience:] No matter how much I change, I’ll never become a car.

True. Does the fact that you will never become a car mean that you can find something inherently you that is the “you-ness”? We get this feeling there is a Ron that is holding all the pieces of Ron together so that none of them float out and become a car. They talk about this in the scriptures. We think there is an owner to this whole thing that is holding it all together. Are we going to find that there is some Ron holding the body and mind together so that they do not fall apart? Are you going to point to some permanent, unchanging mind that is keeping your changing body and mind from falling apart?

Technically speaking, your body could disintegrate. All your molecules could rearrange and become some of the materials that go into making a car, couldn’t they? Could not some of the atoms, or molecules, in your body eventually become the atoms and molecules in a car? So what kind of permanent you is there that makes those atoms and molecules ‘you’? You are saying, “I am not a car” and it is kind of like saying, “This body cannot become a car,” but the fact is that it CAN become a car. Does anyone own these atoms and molecules?

The fact that you as a person are not also a car, does that mean that there is some essence of you-ness? ‘Car’ is something that is just labeled on top of the parts and ‘Ron’ is something that is just labeled on top of the parts. Aside from being merely labeled, you cannot find the car and you cannot find Ron. And Ron cannot find his car. [Laughter]

Soul – No Soul

[Audience:] What about a soul?

That is exactly the thing that Buddhism refutes the existence of: the static, permanent, unchanging soul. I think this is a real profound difference between Buddhism and several other religions. In Hinduism you have this concept of atman, some kind of soul or self with a big ‘S’ and you have it in Christianity. This does not mean every Christian thinks this, but a common view is that there is a permanent and

unchanging soul. This is one of the fundamental things where Buddhism has a really different view, because Buddhism says, if there is such a thing, find it. If there is such a thing, the more you investigate and analyze, the clearer it should become. But in actual fact, the more you investigate and the more you analyze, the more you cannot find it. So we come back to the fact that things are there simply because there is a basis, and on that basis our concept gives it a label.

A Sense of 'I'

[Audience:] What is this sense if 'I' then?

It is something impermanent that has the ability to work with different elements and create appearances. But it is not like the Wizard of Oz. Remember in the Wizard of Oz when Dorothy walks into the throne room, there is this big voice proclaiming, "I am the great Wizard!" and the lights flash? Then the dog Toto goes behind the screen and there is the wizard and he is just some ordinary guy pulling the switches. When we say 'I' sometimes we get that feeling like there is some guy in here behind everything who is making the decisions, pulling the switches and operating the whole thing. Or we think there is some little guy who is a Buddha sitting somewhere in there saying, "I'm going to manifest as that." But what are you going to find that is some little person sitting in there running a show?

All we come to is that there are all these parts. In the case of the mind, there are all these parts of mind. There are the mental consciousness, visual consciousness, mental factors of mindfulness and concentration. There is intelligence, compassion, anger, joy, happiness and all the different mental factors and mental events. They interrelate and different ones come up at different times and things are changing all the time. That is how you get a manifestation. It is the same with the manifestation of the Buddha, except that a Buddha does not have the negative mental factors.

The Causal Energy of Compassion

[In response to audience:] Well, this is getting into a different subject. With the Buddha, because the compassion is so strong, the Buddha does not have to consciously think, "I am going to manifest as this or that." The causal energy of compassion is so strong that it is like the Buddha is governed by compassion.

Nihilism

[In response to audience:] This is a very, very common thing. There are many stories of this. This is exactly the same thing that past meditators have gone through; you look and you analyze and you cannot find anything and then you go, "Oh, I don't exist at all. Nothing exists." Then you get really scared, because there is nothing. That is going to the extreme of nihilism saying that there is absolutely nothing that exists. That is clearly not true.

Can a Buddha be Reborn?

[Audience:] If everything is changing, is becoming a Buddha then a permanent, eternal state, or can a Buddha fall back and be reborn in samsara?

Buddha's mind is not permanent, but from the state of enlightenment, you never fall back. Once you have become enlightened, you never fall back because there are not the causes to fall back. At that point, you have eliminated the attachment, aversion and things like that, so there are not the causes to fall back. So this state of enlightenment is eternal, but the Buddha's mind is not permanent or static, because the Buddha's mind is changing every moment.

Somebody exists as a Buddha because of being merely labeled. Enlightenment exists by being merely labeled. Enlightenment is not some kind of ultimately existent, findable thing. It too is made of qualities and characteristics, and on top of those characteristics, we give it the label 'enlightenment'.

Relating the Label of Something to the Base of the Label

It is real interesting to spend some time thinking about how we relate the label of something to the base of the label. And then how we feel like there is an 'I' that is there holding together the parts, or how we feel there is a Buddha there holding together the enlightened mind, as if the enlightened mind is going to fall apart.

For instance, we might say that there is a clock holding together the parts and making this thing a clock. We probably look at it like first there is the clock and then the parts of the clock. But how can you first

have a clock without having the parts? You have the parts and on top of them, you give them a label. And if you then look within each part, it too exists by being labeled.

It is not like the causes are sitting inside as some solid thing holding the clock together. The causes for this thing we label 'clock' do not exist now. The causes for the clock cease for the clock to come into existence. When the causal energy finishes, the clock finishes.

This takes a while to work at. You have to really think about it, you especially have to start watching how you perceive things. When we first started doing this I asked you to sit in your backyard and look at a tree and ask yourself "What is the tree?" Then I asked you to go through the parts and figure out the relationship between the tree, the branches, the trunk, the leaves and the roots and ask yourself, "At what point does it become a tree? At what point does it stop becoming a tree?" Or you can also look at the tree and think of all the causes that go into making that tree.

The basic thing is to try and get a feeling of what we call the object to be negated, or the object to be refuted, which is the inherent existence, the independent existence, the appearance of that real solid essence of something.

The Cause and the Result Cannot Exist Simultaneously

[Audience:] Why do the causes of the clock, or the tree, cease when the clock or tree exists?

The cause and result cannot exist at the same time. Because if the cause and the result existed at the same time, how could the cause produce the result? If they were to exist at the same time, the result would already be there.

Search and Investigate

This is something to play with. Sit in your backyard and really ask yourself, "Who is sitting here?" Or take a time when you are really angry – "I'm really angry. Somebody offended me. I'm angry and I'm sitting here!" And then ask, "Who's the 'I' that is sitting here? Who is the 'I' that is angry?" Really search and investigate. Do not just sit there and go, "Who is the 'I' that is sitting here? I can't find it, so bye!"

We strongly feel, "I'm sitting here and I'm angry." But who is it that is angry? What can we identify with? What can we draw a circle around and say, "That's the 'me' which is angry." Or when you get into one of these really big funks thinking, "I'm terrible, I can't do anything right, everything is lousy." Who is the 'I' that is so terrible? Try to find that person that is so terrible. Those times when you have very strong emotions, look at how the 'I' appears as the big 'I' and then search for it. Try and find it somewhere.

The Ones Thus Gone

[Audience:] When we talk about the "Ones Thus Gone", where do they go to? **[Laughter]**

Do you mean the "Ones Thus Gone" in the practice of prostrations to the thirty-five Buddhas? The place they went to is a state of mind called the state of nirvana.

This teaching is based on the *Lamrim* or *The Gradual Path to Enlightenment*. Please refer to the following web-page for its outline and other transcripts or to listen to the audio recording of these talks: <http://www.thubtenchodron.org/GradualPathToEnlightenment/outline.html>