

Generating Experiences of Egolessness in Buddhism:

A meditation on egolessness and its therapeutic application

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It is a quite widely held opinion that the induction of all meditative states of consciousness and especially disciplined and structured ones such as Buddhist insight (*vipaśyanā*) meditations on egolessness or identitylessness are the prerogative of monastery-bred philosophers or, more likely, used by recluse-yogins. This, though, is certainly not the case. Obviously both monk-philosophers and yogins do use meditations on egolessness to affect major transformations in their psyches and consequent world-views. They use them successfully because they are in environments which support the development of calmness (*śamatha*) and one-pointedness (*samādhi*), these both being requirements for deep and strong meditation. Still, these same meditations as employed by yogins are used fruitfully outside of formal contemplation and by ordinary people. The purpose, then, of this paper is to outline a generally accessible meditation and point to its therapeutic if not transformational potential.

The format of the meditation outlined here is derived from an oral-aural communication received from dGe-sés Thub-bstan blo-ldan in the course of his teaching Candrakīrti's *Madhyamakāvātāra* at Chenrezig Institute, Queensland. The meditation presented here, though, is more

broadly based and culturally relevant inasmuch as particularly Buddhist examples, encrustations, and terminology is being omitted though retained in the notes. The textual embellishment comes from works of the Mādhyamikas, Nāgārjuna, Candrakīrti, and Śāntideva. It is necessarily a pot-pourri because the philosophical texts themselves, though they contain the consequential reasonings that occur in analytical meditations, are in a different genre to the meditation manuals. To amalgamate the two, one has to sift through the texts to find examples which are pertinent to and exemplify the particular meditations being specified.

The problems that arise in life-situations can all be reduced ultimately to what may be called ego-intrusion. This is the innate tendency to imbue experience with an attitude of acquisitiveness; it is the process whereby we consciously and unconsciously acquire and reject particular experiences as well as experience *in toto*. We set up, hypostatize, and maintain a relationship with our sensory and conceptual environments such that we create suffering generally by bifurcating objects into the categories of desirables and undesirables. This labelling procedure then necessitates that gross or subtle psychic disturbances take place when we are either confronted by undesirables or removed from desirables.

A solution to this problem can be approached meditatively from either of two angles: namely, from the object side or the subject side. Philosophically it does not matter at all from which side one makes an approach because subjects by definition gain their existence from standing in relationships to objects and *vice versa*. Psychologically, though, it is useful to know meditative solutions from both sides for, therapeutically, one approach is often more amenable or accessible than the other. In terms of *paṇḍits* meditations, which are analytical in style and one of which we will outline, this means that there are different thought patterns for meditating on the selflessness of persons and that of phenomena. One is, then, advised to familiarize oneself with at least the basic pattern of analysis in both of these for this gives one greater scope in confronting and removing the various problematical situations that continually occur in daily life.

The function of analytical meditations is to generate cognitions of egolessness. This is accomplished by coming to realize that phenomena, oneself included, do not, in fact, possess the desirable and undesirable qualities that we attribute to them. Such a realization, if it can be accomplished, frees one's mind from bewilderment and even neurosis because there is no compulsion to avoid or obtain different types of experience. The cognition of egolessness is, then, accompanied by the creation of psychological space and impartiality.

The techniques used to gain cognitions of egolessness are based on generating controlled and well-formed contradictions, which, when given the requisite commitment to reason, force one into realizing that

a particular viewpoint or attitude is baseless and has no reference to the real state of the world. Generally the egolessness or non-self existence of *phenomena* (*dharmā-nairātmya*) is produced by a reasoning called diamond grains (*vajra-kāṇa*) or refutation of birth by use of the four extremes and possibilities /2/. The non-self existence of *persons* is demonstrated especially by a reasoning known as the 'four logical steps'. These are the normal analyses and their objects. It is possible, though, to analyze different objects with the same reasoning /3/. We may note here also, that when a selflessness of persons is referred to it means specifically the non-self existence of the 'I' or self-consciousness. Because of this, phenomena can refer to aspects of persons such as their bodies.

Though there are a variety of techniques for meditation, if one has to say that one approach is more valuable and important than any other we must say that it is through the methods which establish the *non-self of persons*. This is because it is the conception of a self (*ātma-grāha*), meaning an 'I' conceived of and grasped as self-existing, which is the principle cause of suffering. As the philosopher Candrakīrti writes in his *Madhyamakāvātāra* (vs. 6.120):

After seeing with the mind that all the faults of the afflictions arise from the wrong view of the transitory mind-body complex, and realizing that the (nominally existing) 'I' is its object, the yogin discards (the view of a truly existing) self /4/.

Therefore, in all the schools of Buddhism at least, meditation on the non-self existence of the 'I' is more immediately relevant. Meditators normally begin by emphasizing meditations on the selflessness of the 'I' and only after gaining familiarity with the techniques and results of these meditations do they analyze various external phenomena. Also, it is easier to realize the egolessness of the personality than the egolessness of things and hence more efficient and economical, in terms of realizing the egolessness of both, to concentrate initially on analyses specifically relevant to the non-self of persons.

Because of these and other reasons, then, here we need only detail the singly most important technique of 'four logical steps'. Of this technique dGe-śes Nāg-dbañ dar-rgyas says that: 'If one meditates . . . using these four points, the danger of wrong understanding is avoided' /5/.

The meditation is as follows:

1. The vital point which determines what is to be refuted (*niṣedhya-viniścaya-marma*).

The first step is to locate and identify the 'I' or self we conceive to be really existing. That is, we must find the conception of an independently or self-existing 'I'. In fact it does not really exist but in ignorance we conceive of it and then grasp it as something real. It is this wrongly

conceived 'I' that one tries to identify. Further, it is a congenital or deep-seated (*sahaja*) conception that all people construct, not just an acquired and conceptualized (*parikalpita*) 'I' which arises from holding some philosophical opinion. That is, we are looking for and locating our ordinary non-analytic conception of an 'I', one present with us always, and irrespective of what philosophical beliefs we hold about an 'I'. If one does not firmly identify such an 'I' then analysis cannot proceed for the reasons that there is either no object to be analyzed, or, if it is held as a vague and blurry image then the analysis loses strength through not having a well defined object. In such cases an analysis peters out, never finding the non-self existence of the person./6/ On the importance of firmly fixing the object to be negated Śāntideva in his *Bodhicaryāvatara* (vs. 9.140a) writes:

Without the imagined (*kalpita*) phenomena being contacted (*spr̥ṣṭvā*), their non-(self) existence is not grasped (*gr̥hyate*) /7/.

As the analysis is only effective to whatever degree the object to which it is directed - in this case the 'I' - is identified, we must get a strong and firm conception of this object.

Before 'working through' a meditation based on a commonly held sense of the 'I', that is, one which applies to most of us, rather than particular and idiosyncratic conceptions or aspects, we may mention that the process of choosing the 'object to be negated' can become quite refined. Rather than using a fairly gross conception one may choose from various self-images and analyze them individually. At times in which one is especially body conscious, for example, one could locate the body or perhaps brain and explore the possibility of these being the 'I'. Again, psychological traits, characteristics, neuroses, and attitudes can all become the objects of individual meditations and cognitions of their egolessness generated. Also, as particular environmental situations and experience-types cause one problems one can focus one's attention to the reacting part of one's personality and *via* analysis determine that that personality aspect is not in fact really me. Ultimately, of course, all self-images, both problematical and comfortable ones have to be analyzed and firm cognitions of their individual and cumulative egolessness obtained. As stated, though, the conception of an 'I' being located in this sample analysis is one existing essentially in most people.

One begins, then, by isolating a subtle portion of one's mind to observe the 'I' and carry through the analysis. That is, we set aside a corner of the intellect to see how the 'I' is conceived and then to examine it. We induce a state of calmness and then being perceiving our 'I'. If the 'I' is not well established in the mental continuum we fabricate a conception of it. This we can do by remembering an incident when the self existing 'I' was being strongly experienced, such as when we are happy, excited, suffering, or angry. We may, for example, remember an

incident when we were falsely accused of, say, lying or stealing, and then regenerate or simulate the experience of the 'I' or 'me' sense rising up within us. dGe-sés bLo-ldan has suggested that an 'I' can be generated by visualizing oneself in an accident such as an aeroplane crashing. The 'I' one is interested in analyzing is that 'I' which feels it is going to disintegrate and disappear. The 'I' that feels, 'I am no longer going to be.' Whatever incident one remembers or fabricates it is best if the cause of the happiness or suffering is evidently another person or object rather than oneself. The 'I' which is now being perceived should be felt rather than being experienced as an intellectual idea. Though it may be difficult to establish and maintain a constant perception of a self existing 'I' one should persevere until one is clearly aware of its presence. Once it is established one must be careful that the strength of the observing or analytical consciousness is balanced between being overpowered and destroyed by the generated 'I' feeling, and itself perceiving the 'I' but not destroying it. Thus, an analytical consciousness and an 'I' sense should both be maintained, side-by-side, within the stream of consciousness.

2. The vital point which determines the pervasion (by the two alternatives) (*vyāpti-viniścaya-marma*).

Having fabricated and now perceiving what is taken to be a truly existing and substantial 'I', one next determines, using the analytical consciousness, exactly the mode and manner of its existence. That is, of this innately conceived 'I', one is going to speculate in what possible modes it could exist. Of ways in which an 'I' could exist there are two, and only two, possibilities. Either it must be one with, that is, the same as the mind-body complex, or it must be separate, that is, different from the mind-body complex /8/. There is no other way it could exist. This is because sameness and difference are jointly exhaustive contradictories. If two things exist they must be either the same or different. Some may think a third way of existing is for the 'I' to be a mixture with, rather than one or separate from, the mind-body complex. This, though, is not a real third possibility. That is, the 'I' cannot be partially separate from the mind-body complex because if it cannot exist as either one with or separately from the mind-body complex then it cannot be a mixture of these. This is just the same as say a mixture of milk and water, though being different from either milk or water individually, still cannot exist if there are no such things individually as milk and water. That is, the 'I' being neither the same thing as nor a different thing from the mind-body complex, precludes it somehow being the same and somehow different.

Then, the 'I' we are conceiving of is either the same entity as the mind-body complex or it is a different entity. One must firmly realize that as these two alternatives are jointly exhaustive there can be no third way of it existing, and therefore if it exists in neither of the two possible ways then it cannot be truly existing. The essence of this

second step is the strong decision that the 'I', to be truly or really existing, must be either one with, or different from, the mind-body complex. So, after determining the only two ways in which a self existing 'I' could exist, in the following steps we are going to test each of these possibilities in turn. To this end one makes a decision by committing oneself to reason and experience by analyzing respectively whether the 'I' is the same as or different from the mind-body complex.

3. The vital points which determine the absence of (the 'I' and mind-body complex) being oneness (*ekatva-viyukta-viniścaya-marma*).

If the 'I' is the same entity as the mind-body complex then immediately problems arise as consequences which would contradict our experience. That is, consequences result if the 'I' is one with the mind and/or body complex which are not in correspondence with our experience. For a start, if the 'I' is the same thing as the mind-body complex at a minimum there would have to be at least two 'I's, one for the material component and one for the mental. In fact, there would really have to be as many 'I' continua as there are discernable parts of the mind-body complex. As Candrakīrti (*Madhyamakāvatāra*, 6.127ab) writes:

If the self (*ātman*) was the mind-body complex, then because they are many (parts) there would also be many selves.

If the body is really composed of different parts, such as organs, legs, blood, bones, etc., and the 'I' is oneness with all of these then there would have to be a distinct 'I' for each of the different parts. In fact, there would have to be as many 'I's as there are partless particles in a body, if one wishes to maintain an atomistic reduction. But, this talk of very many or even just two selves goes against our conception of ourselves and does not accord with our experience. There is then an unsolvable dilemma if the 'I' is the same thing as the mind-body. If we were to still try asserting their unity and also our experience of just one 'I' continuum then we could not assent to the body and mind being different, nor the body being composed of parts, both facts which again contradict our experience. Our conclusion must be that the 'I' cannot be identical with the mind-body. Another fact which supports this conclusion is that if the 'I' was one with the mind-body complex then it would be senseless to say 'my body' or 'my mind' because these would be the same entity. In *Madhyamakāvatāra* (vs. 6.137) Candrakīrti states:

The acquirer and the acquisition [i.e. the mind-body complex] cannot be the one thing. If they were, then the action (*karma*) and the agent (*kāraka*) would be oneness. If you think there

is no agent but the action [or mind-body] exists, it cannot be, for without the agent there is no action.

To talk about 'my body' or 'my flesh', just to be able to conceive of 'something being mine' or 'my owning something', we must distinguish an owner from the thing owned. We must be able to separate them, but this is impossible if the two things are really one. In fact, if the 'I' and the mind-body are one it is not only meaningless but quite impossible to conceive and then formulate phrases such as the above. We could not articulate statements such as 'my foot hurt' and 'my mind is foggy'. Perhaps we could say 'my I' in referring to the body, or 'the body's body', but in either case the sense of myself owning and operating my body is not being conveyed. Such expressions are not used because they do not express one's experiences of the 'I' and the body. Asserting an 'I' would be meaningless because it would be just another name for the mind-body complex.

Another problem arising from the 'I' being one with the mind-body is that the 'I-s' existence and mode of existence would be determined entirely by the arising and decay of the mind-body. Nāgārjuna in his *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (vs. 18.1a) writes:

If the individual self (*ātma*) were [identical to] the 'groups' (*skandha*) [i.e. mind-body] then it would partake of origination and destruction /9/.

Some consequences are that the 'I' would enlarge as I grew up; my 'I' would be diminished through an amputation; and my 'I' would change as my mental states do. Also, if I were to experience ego-transcendence my body-mind would disappear from sight. Thus, for example, when a yogin realized egolessness it would mean that because his self is dissolving, so must be his mind and body.

It may be thought that if we sever the body and mind, saying that the 'I' is only one of these, then we can avoid problems such as the above. This is not the case though. If the 'I' is one with the body it would be material, having extension, and secondary qualities such as colour. This, though, contradicts our experience of the 'I' as something which is immaterial, shapeless, and colourless. Also, if the 'I' was the same as the body, then at death, when the body is buried or cremated, it would also be true that the self or 'I' was being buried or burned. Another possibility, but one which would similarly contravene experience, is for the 'I' to be oneness with the mind. In this case it would not only be senseless to say, 'I am happy' or 'I am angry', it would also be wrong, because the 'I' could not be separated from the happiness or anger. That is, the 'I' could not possess mental states. Further, if the 'I' was one with the mind we could have no conscious memories or remembrances because there would be no 'I' to connect experiences as being within the same continuum. That is, if the 'I' is oneness with the

mind then there could be no subject, namely a separate 'I', with which to relate experiences together as forming experiences of the one person. It would, for example, not be possible to say 'I remember X' or 'I did Y yesterday'. Thus, the 'I' being one with the mind would contradict our having memories. Also, in the case of the 'I' and mind being the same we could not even say 'I am thinking' because the 'I' would be the thinking, not something separate that is doing and possessing the thinking.

There are many dialectical tests which demonstrate that the 'I' and mind-body complex are not the same entity. As what makes most sense depends to some degree on one's personal experiences and intellectual commitments, one is advised to test each consequence and its ramifications until finding one that shakes the belief and feeling that the 'I' is the same as the mind and/or body /10/.

4. The vital points which determine the absence of [the 'I' and mind-body complex] being different (*anekatva-viyukta-viniścaya-marma*).

Having determined that the 'I' cannot be one with the mind-body complex we will now turn our attention to the only other possibility, namely, that the 'I' is totally other than the mind-body. That is, we will examine the only remaining alternative, that the 'I' is different from the mind-body. Immediately we begin this investigation a problem arises in locating such an 'I'. As Nāgārjuna (*Mūlamadhyamakārikā*, 18.1b) observes:

If [the individual self] were different from the 'groups', then it would be without the characteristics of the 'groups' /11/.

The 'I' being completely different from the mind-body would be unrelated to it, and consequently there would be no point in studying the mind and/or body in an attempt to find the 'I'. But the 'I' is always and only cognized with reference to the mind and/or body. As Nāgārjuna in *Ratnāvalī* (vs. 1.33) says:

Just as without depending on a mirror the image of one's face is not seen, so too the 'I' does not exist without depending on the aggregates /12/.

Repeating this analysis, if the 'I' is a really different entity than the mind-body then it cannot have the qualities and characteristics of the mind-body for then it would not be really different. But without having physical or mental marks the 'I' is without any defining characteristics, and hence is unfindable. Always it is found only by virtue of being related to the mind and/or body. Saying this slightly differently, if the 'I' is completely other than the mind-body, then even

after the mind-body is completely removed still one could locate or point to the self. This though is not possible for we can never find the self completely unattached or disconnected from the body and/or mind. As Nāgārjuna (*Ratnāvalī*, 1.82) writes:

The aggregates are not the self, they are not in it,
it is not in them, without them it is not, it is not
mixed with the aggregates like fire and fuel, there-
fore how can the self exist?/13/.

The experiential consequences of the 'I' being really other than the mind-body are that we could not say, for example, 'I am thinking' or 'I am cold' because the 'I' would not be the sort of thing that could think or experience bodily sensations. Similarly, statements like 'I am a male' or 'I get angry quickly' would be necessarily false because the 'I' could not be a possessor of properties such as being male (a physical attribute) or being angry (a mental attribute). Further, if the 'I' were unassociated with mind-body complexes we would have no means for distinguishing ourself from other's selves or between other's selves. We would, this means, have no information-conveying speech enabling us to attribute mental and physical properties to ourselves and others. This and the other consequences, though, clearly run counter to the facts.

The only conclusion we can make is that if the 'I' is separate from the mind-body complex then there is no object that it can be; it could not be any sort of 'thing' or 'entity' and hence would not be truly existing. It would be 'like a flower in the sky'. In carrying out this fourth step the conclusion is, therefore, that no truly existing 'I' can be found which is separate from the mind and/or body.

The overall conclusion to the last two steps is expressed by Nāgārjuna (*Ratnāvalī*, 1.54) where he writes:

Just as a mirage is like water but is not water and
does not in fact exist [as water], so the aggregates
are like a self but are not selves and do not in fact
exist [as selves] /14/.

This is to say that as an 'I' can exist in neither of the two possible ways there can be no real 'I' /15/.

With this meditation the analysis should become finer and finer and continue with the conviction that one is definitely going to find the 'I'. The greater the initial impulse the more profound will be the realisation of the emptiness of the self /16/. The realisation which can be obtained using this analysis is that of a space-like emptiness. Explaining the result, Śāntideva in his *Bodhicaryāvatāra* (vs. 9.111) writes:

When the thought [process] has been thought

about there is [seen to be] no foundation (*āśraya*) to thought. Because of no foundation, it [i.e., thought] does not arise, and this [cessation] is called 'beyond sorrow' (*nirvāṇa*) /17/.

When this, or an approximation to it, has been generated, one should, within formal meditations, apply a single-pointed concentration to the experience and sustain this for as long as possible. When the experience begins to fade it can be rejuvenated by again reflecting on the analysis. With sufficient practice of generating experiences of egolessness, using this and other reasonings, it is possible to create the experience without the force of an analysis.

In concluding this paper I wish just to counterbalance specifying analytical meditations as being merely devices for smoothing out the rough patches in everyday living. Though they can very effectively serve this function their true potential lies in transformational psychology and is the obtaining of ever more adequate and ultimately liberating levels of being. To obtain the more profound goals and also to be able to isolate and use analytical consciousnesses in daily situations depends on the development of concentration in formal meditative settings. Thus, in the case of mundane and supramundane employments of analytical meditations, the gaining of familiarity in controlled environments is essential. The familiarity in its turn comes only from the repeated statement to oneself of the logical arguments and experiential consequences of holding wrong conceptions. In time the arguments produce inferential cognitions of egolessness and these, again with further practice, can be transformed into direct realisations.

End Notes

1. I thank dGe-sés Thub-bstan blo-ldan and rDza-srib sPrul-sku Rin-po-che for experiential demonstration of the 'four point' meditation, Dr. Arvind Sharma for checking the Sanskrit verses, and Dr. Martin Willson for permission to consult his draft translation of *Madhyamakāvatāra*.
2. For an example of the *vajrakāṇa* see Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, ch.1.
3. For an example of the *vajrakāṇa* having the self as an investigated object see Nāgārjuna's *Ratnāvalī*, vs. 1.37. When the 'four point' analysis is used with phenomena it is in terms of subjects and predicates or substances and attributes.
4. Tibetan text, *dBu ma la 'jug pa*, 'Bras spuñs sGo mañ xylograph.

5. Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey, *Tibetan Tradition of Mental Development*, Dharamsala: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 1976, p.164.
6. To carry through this or any other Madhyamaka analysis one has to make a definition and then stick with it. Here one must identify an 'I' and then, with that definition, analyze its existence. Sometimes, though not always, the fine details of a definition are not so important. The primary concern is to formulate a simple, relevant, and workable definition and then to use it. During an actual analysis one should not be reformulating a definition. If time is spent debating the pros and cons of one definition over another then no analysis is completed. All this is not to say that finely conceived objects of negation are unimportant.
7. Based on M. Matics (trans.), *Entering the Path of Enlightenment*, London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd. 1971, p. 224. Sanskrit text, Dr. P.L. Vaidya (ed.), *Bodhicaryāvatāra of Śāntideva*, Darbhanga: The Mithila Institute, 1960.
8. In Buddhist philosophy and psychology the mind-body complex breaks down into the five groups or aggregates (*skandha*). These are: form (*rūpa*), feeling (*vedanā*), discrimination (*saññā*), compositional factors (*saṃskāra*), and consciousness.
9. F. J. Streng, *Emptiness - a Study in Religious Meaning*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1967, p. 204.
10. Further consequences, which have bite and purchase for Buddhists at least, are that if the 'I' is one with the body then memory of former births would be impossible because if the 'I' was just the body, central nervous system, and/or brain, then, as this changes in transmigration the 'I-s' from birth to birth would be inherently different and hence unrelatable. Also if I am reborn and I am my body then this very same body must be reborn. If persons are their bodies this would also make impossible the phenomenon of disembodied or formless realms (*ārūpyadhātu*).
11. Streng, *op. cit.*, p. 204.
12. J. Hopkins, et al., (trans.), *The Precious Garland and the Song of the Four Mindfulnesses*, London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1975, p. 21.
13. Hopkins, *op. cit.*, p. 28.
14. *ibid.*, p. 24.
15. For a stricter and more definitive conclusion see *Ratnāvalī*, 2.3.
16. This four-point meditation can be expanded by using further reasons for why the self or 'I' cannot be the body-mind. Traditionally it is expanded into seven and nine points of analysis, these having five and seven-fold reasonings respectively. The first four points in both of these are the same as in the meditation just outlined. Examples of the seven and nine points are respectively in *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, Ch. 20 and *Madhyamakāvatāra*, 6.151. Further reasonings which conclude that the self is insubstantial and ultimately unreal are: (1) that it is not the shape of the mind-body, (2) that it does not depend on the mind-body, (3) that it does not possess the mind-body, (4) that it is not the shape of the mind-body, (5) that it is not the composite of the mind-body. The five-cornered reasoning incorporates the first three of these. These expanded meditations isolate specific types of relations and spell them out individually. The relations chosen are specifically the commonly held ways of misconceiving and maintaining a belief in a real self. The first two reasons though,

i.e., those we have outlined, are the most important because sameness and difference, by themselves, establish non-real existence. All the other corners can be subsumed under, or covered by, the postulates of identity and difference (*tattvānyatvapakṣa*).

17. Equally well we could read here 'thought (*per se*)', or, parenthetically, '(the object of) thought'. As the arising of thoughts and the objects of thought occur in dependence on each other, the foundationlessness of either will necessarily produce a realisation of the foundationlessness of thought itself. It is, in terms of analysis, just a matter of directness in approaching what, in either way, will be a common conclusion. That is, one thinks about/investigates thought itself/the investigation, or, somewhat more indirectly, the objects of thought/the 'things' being investigated. The result of both analyses, though, will be a cessation of thought, i.e., a space-like emptiness, because thought itself will be unfindable, or, the objects of thought - a necessary condition for its support - will be. Though vs. 108 may support reading '(the object of) thought', the more literal meaning is quite valid. Matics (p. 221), seemingly reading the more direct route, also gives: When what is to be examined has been examined by what is examined; it has no foundation.