

CHAPTER SIX

Searching for the Person

THE BASIS OF DESIGNATION AND THE DESIGNATED OBJECT

When we study emptiness and dependent arising, the terms *basis of designation* and *designated object* appear often. The basis of designation, or basis of imputation, is the basis upon which a label or name is given. It is the basis to which the name of an object refers. The designated object is the object designated in dependence on its basis of designation. For example, in dependence on the collection of car parts arranged in a particular way, we label “car” and the car exists. The designated object is the car, and the car parts arranged in a certain way are the basis of designation. While the basis of designation and the designated object depend on each other, they are not exactly the same. If we try to find what the name “car” refers to within its basis of designation, we cannot find anything that we can isolate and point to as being the car.

In terms of the person, the person is the designated object, and the aggregates are the basis of designation. That is, the aggregates are the basis in dependence on which the name “person” or “I” is imputed. They are what the name “person” refers to. While the various Buddhist tenet systems have different ideas about exactly what “I” refers to, generally speaking they agree that when we say that the aggregates are the basis of designation of the person, it means that by the aggregates appearing to us, we can identify a person. We sometimes recognize the person by hearing his voice or by seeing his face, back, or hands. Without any of the aggregates appearing, there is no way to know a person is there. Thus the aggregates are considered the basis of designation of the person; they are the basis depending on which the person is imputed.

CHART: ILLUSTRATION OF THE PERSON

<i>School</i>	<i>Illustration of the person</i>
Many non-Buddhist schools	Permanent, unitary, and independent person that is separate from the aggregates
Vaibhashika	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Five aggregates • Consciousness aggregate • Inexpressible as either one or separate from aggregates
Sautrantika Following Scripture	Continuum of the aggregates
Sautrantika Following Reasoning	Mental consciousness
Chittamatra Following Scripture	Foundation consciousness
Chittamatra Following Reasoning	Mental consciousness
Sautrantika-Svatantrika-Madhyamaka	Subtle, neutral mental consciousness
Yogachara-Svatantrika-Madhyamaka	Continuum of mental consciousness
Prasangika-Madhyamaka	Mere I

AN INHERENTLY EXISTENT PERSON CAN'T BE FOUND

Previously we mentioned three wrong conceptions or wrong ways of grasping the person: grasping (1) a permanent, unitary, and independent person, (2) a self-sufficient, substantially existent person, and (3) an inherently existent person. Having explored the first two, we now arrive at the third, the subtlest object of negation in relation to the person—a self-existent or inherently existent person that can be found among the aggregates.

While the lower schools all posit a person who is findable when searched for within the aggregates, the Prasangikas alone say this is not possible.

What does it mean to say that the person cannot be found when we search for it? After all, there are many people in this room, and if someone asks, “Where is Susan?” we can point to her right over there.

In understanding what inherent existence and its emptiness would be

in terms of the person, it is helpful to first do this in terms of a physical object. Let's take a microphone as an example. The microphone exists. It is something we use in various ways: We bring it here, take it there, turn it off and on. But when we inquire what the microphone is and try to pinpoint a microphone within its parts, it is difficult to isolate something that is it. Is the microphone the top part? The bottom part? Is it the plastic or the metal? When we look beyond the superficial appearance of the microphone, we cannot find one part to identify as the real microphone. And there certainly isn't a microphone that exists separate from its parts.

Yet still the microphone can be used to make my voice louder. The microphone exists: We can buy it and sell it; it can break and get fixed. **But when we look within its parts and ask, "What is the real microphone?" there is nothing we can point to as being the microphone. We find ourselves having to accept that the microphone is merely labeled in dependence on the assembly of its parts.**

Similarly, a person exists. A person is born, dies, experiences happiness and suffering—the person exists in life after life in cyclic existence. But if we ask, "What is the person that does all these activities?" **the Prasangikas say that, upon analysis, there is nothing we can point to as being the person.** We cannot find anything that is a real person that continues from life to life. We are left with the conclusion that the I is empty of inherent existence.

At the same time the person is empty of inherent existence, the person still exists. What is the person that exists but is empty? It is the mere I. **The mere I is the person that exists by being merely imputed by name and concept. It's nothing more or less than that. It exists, and yet when we search with ultimate analysis to find it, we cannot.**

Prasangikas assert that when we search within the parts, we won't be able to find anything that exists from the side of the object. We cannot pinpoint a person existing from the side of the five aggregates. There is no person that is the aggregates. There is no person in the aggregates. There is no person that possesses the aggregates. Nor is there a person that is possessed by the aggregates. And there is no person separate from the aggregates either.

When we say that the person can't be found, do not understand it in the conventional sense. In our normal, daily life, we ask, "Where is John?" and someone points to the person on the chair across the room. Conventionally, we find John sitting on the chair. But if we were to say this is what is meant by searching for the person, someone could legitimately think

it ridiculous, because anybody can see that there are people here in this room. On the superficial, everyday, nonanalytical level, there are teachers, students, monastics, and laypeople in a room together.

But that is not what is meant here. Here we are looking at the basis of designation—the basis upon which we designate or impute “person”—and inquiring, “What are we pointing to as being the real person? What does the word *person* refer to?” When we look within that basis—the five aggregates—and search for what the label “person” or “I” refers to, we will not find something that is the person. That’s what is meant when we say, “You can’t find the person.”

Because this is a difficult concept to understand, I’ll give another example. If I tell you that this clock on the table can’t be found if you search for it, you will say, “That is absolute nonsense, because anybody can see that this clock can be found on the table. You can see it there!” That’s not the kind of unfindability we are talking about. Here “not findable” means that when we look within the parts, when we search in the basis that we use the name “clock” to refer to, can we pinpoint something that is the clock? No, we cannot identify anything as being the clock. Here “unfindable” means that we cannot find the clock when we look within the basis of designation of the term “clock.”

Previously I warned that misunderstanding the meaning of emptiness and selflessness can be dangerous. For example, if we think that since we cannot find the person when we search in its basis of designation, the clock does not exist at all, we fall to the extreme of nihilism. Thinking that the person is totally nonexistent because it cannot be found under analysis is incorrect. In that case, we think emptiness means that nothing exists. If that is so, then karma and its results do not exist, the Three Jewels do not exist, nothing exists. That is a very dangerous way to think. So please be careful and do not misunderstand emptiness to mean total nonexistence. Things exist and function on the level of appearances. It is only when we analyze to try to find what exactly the name of the object refers to that it eludes us.

THE ILLUSTRATION OF THE PERSON

Each of the four major Buddhist tenet systems posits a different idea of the nature of the person. They have arrived at these conclusions after a great deal of analysis and investigation. Their conclusions about the nature of

the person are not whimsical, offhand statements but well thought-out propositions. Each Buddhist school seeks to eliminate grasping at a hypothetical person that sentient beings erroneously grasp as existent. In doing so, each school arrives at what it considers to be the ultimate nature of the person. Having done that, the question still remains, “What is the person who sometimes engages in destructive actions and as a result experiences suffering, the person who sometimes engages in constructive actions and experiences happiness, the person who goes from birth to birth, who creates karma and experiences the results, the person who renounces cyclic existence, practices the path, and attains liberation?” While all of the Buddhist schools agree that the person is related to the five aggregates, they do not all agree on just what is the person.

In exploring this topic, we encounter the expression the “illustration or example of the person.” The use of the term *illustration* is clear in the context of the three: definiendum (the object that is defined), definition, and illustration. For example, impermanence is a definiendum, its definition is “momentary,” and an illustration of something that is impermanent is a jug. Similarly, the person is a definiendum, “the (mere) I imputed depending on the four or five aggregates” is its definition, and an illustration would be me, my mother, a teacher, a dog, a monastic, a god, a hell being, and so on. While these are illustrations or examples of a person, here our interest lies in the illustration of the person that cycles in samsara, practices the path, and attains liberation. Each tenet system has its own ideas about what is the illustration of this person that continues from one life to the next and on to liberation.

Among Vaibhashikas, some say the five aggregates are the illustration of the person. Others say the fifth aggregate, consciousness, is the illustration of the person. Some other Vaibhashikas say that the person can’t be expressed as permanent or impermanent or as one with the aggregates or separate from the aggregates.

Most Sautrantikas conclude that the mental consciousness is the illustration of the person. However, “Sautrantikas Following Scripture”²¹ say that the continuum of the aggregates is the illustration of the person.

“Chittamatrins Following Scripture” have a different idea. They accept eight consciousnesses—the five sense consciousnesses and the mental consciousness accepted by the other systems plus an afflicted consciousness and a foundation consciousness where all the karmic seeds are stored until

they ripen. Chittamatrins assert that the foundation consciousness is the illustration of the person.

Within the Madhyamaka system, the Svatantrikas say a subtle, neutral mental consciousness is the illustration of the person. Bhavaviveka states this in his *Blaze of Reasoning (Tarkajvala)*.

Each school from the Vaibhashikas up to the Svatantrikas finds the person when searching for the person within the five aggregates. In brief, each tenet system except for the Prasangika says that to identify the illustration of the person we must look for it within the five aggregates and that it is found when sought among the five aggregates, which are the basis of designation of the person. However, what the systems find as the person differs. They say, “The mental consciousness, collection of the aggregates, foundation consciousness is the illustration of the person. It is what we find when we look for the person in its basis of designation. This is the person who cycles in cyclic existence, who creates karma and experiences its effects, and who attains liberation.” By saying this, they all say that the person exists from its own side.

The Prasangikas have a different idea. They say that when you look for the person in the aggregates, you don't find anything. If you were able to find the person within the aggregates, that would mean that the person would exist from its own side. If it existed from its own side, it would be self-existent. But this mind that thinks the person is self-existent is the root of cyclic existence! It is the ignorance that has kept us trapped in cyclic existence from beginningless time. Therefore, the Prasangikas insist that when you search for the person who cycles in cyclic existence and who attains liberation, you cannot find it. You cannot identify something that definitely is the person.

As we've seen, each tenet system posits that whatever it asserts to be the person is what goes from life to life, accumulates karma, experiences the resultant rebirths, and so forth. To the Vaibhashikas who assert that the five aggregates are the illustration of person, the Prasangikas say, “If that were so, then all five aggregates accumulate virtuous and nonvirtuous karma, experience happiness and suffering as a result. This is because whatever arising or perishing the person experiences, the aggregates must also experience. That is, if the person goes from one life to the next, the body must go to the next life too. That is the consequence of saying that the five aggregates are the person. Likewise, if the body perishes, the self must

as well. In that case, there would be no person to continue to the next life and experience the result of his or her karma.” These are the contradictions the Prasangikas point out in the Vaibhashika position.

The Prasangikas say that once the person is asserted to be self-existent, many unacceptable consequences inevitably follow, such as the person being independent of any causes and conditions or the person being permanent. By pointing out these faulty consequences that result from identifying the person among the aggregates, they refute a person that is self-existent.

In contrast to each of the lower schools that posit something among the aggregates to be the person, the Prasangikas say *the mere I is the illustration of the person*. That is, the mere I is what creates karma, experiences its results, circles in cyclic existence, and attains liberation. The mere I—the I that exists by being merely labeled by name and concept in dependence on the aggregates—is what does all this. But what kind of I is that? There is nothing to hold on to.

To avoid this seeming nihilism, Svatantrikas say the continuity of the mental consciousness is the person. At first glance, this seems quite convincing, because it is the mental consciousness that goes from life to life. When we talk about the person creating positive karma, leaving that life and that body behind, going on to a new life, taking on a new body, and experiencing the results of the previous actions—the mental consciousness is what is actually doing all that. Therefore the continuity of the mental consciousness, which is the illustration of the person, is what goes from one life to the next. This continuity of the mental consciousness is always present; it is able to “hold everything together” so that the karma created in one life is experienced by the same person in the next life. In other words, faced by the questions, “What carries the karmic latencies from one lifetime to the next so that the person who did the actions experiences the results?” the Svatantrikas reply, “The continuity or stream of the mental consciousness.”

The Prasangikas totally disagree with this, saying that if we look for something to point to that is definitely the person, we are not able to find anything. If we insist that there is something that is the person, we are grasping at an inherently existent self, which is precisely what the Buddha said does not exist. For this reason the Prasangikas say that everything is mere name, mere label, and mere imputation by conception.

THE ILLUSTRATION OF THE PERSON, THE MERE I, AND THE CONTINUITY OF MENTAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Why do the Prasangikas say the mere I is the illustration of the person? To make the point that the person is not found when searched for in the aggregates. The *mere* in “mere I” negates the same thing that is negated when we say “merely imputed by conception” and “merely labeled”; it negates existing from its own side. Saying that the mere I is the person eliminates any of the aggregates being the person. It gives the idea that the person is not findable among the aggregates. Nevertheless, the mere I and the person are one nature because the mere I is the illustration of person.

The mere I is the I that is merely imputed in dependence on the continuity of the mental consciousness²² because the mental consciousness is what goes from life to life and to enlightenment. The Prasangikas say that what the mere I refers to is the continuity of the mental consciousness. This is very different from the other schools that say that the continuity of the mental consciousness is the illustration of the person, because those systems also assert that when you search for the person in the aggregates, you find the continuity of the mental consciousness. It is in the context of searching for the person in the aggregates and finding the continuity of the mental consciousness that they claim the continuity of the mental consciousness to be the illustration of the person. The Prasangikas do not agree; they maintain that when you search for the person in the aggregates, you cannot find anything that is the person. Thus while they say that what the mere I refers to is the continuity of the mental consciousness, they do not say that the continuity of the mental consciousness is the illustration of the person.

The mere I is the illustration of the person, and the basis of imputation of the mere I is the continuity of the mental consciousness, which changes moment by moment. The continuity of the mental consciousness acts as the basis upon which the karmic seeds are deposited. When that continuity of consciousness is purified, it becomes the omniscient mind of a buddha, and the person becomes an arya buddha.

This is very difficult to understand. I myself found it very confusing, but listening to His Holiness the Dalai Lama’s teachings many times has made it clearer. I would like to review this point to help you understand. The

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continuity of the mental consciousness is the basis of designation of the mere I, or to say it in another way, the mere I is labeled in dependence on the continuity of mental consciousness. The mere I is the illustration of the person, and *mere I* refers to the continuity of mental consciousness. However, the continuity of mental consciousness is not the person, although it is the basis of designation of the person.

The continuity of mental consciousness is called the *mere I*. This means that referring to the continuity of the mental consciousness, we can say, "This is the mere I." But someone might object, saying, "Wait a minute! If the continuity of the mental consciousness is the mere I, then you're saying the mere I is findable under analysis; that when you search for the mere I, you find the continuity of the mental consciousness."

No, the mere I is not findable under analysis. When we say, "The continuity of the mental consciousness is the mere I," we are using ordinary speech, not philosophical language. For example, in ordinary speech, a person may say, "I am Jennifer." However, to be precise in philosophical language, she would say, "My name is Jennifer." Similarly, in everyday conventional language she may say "I am a monastic" and "I am a human being." If someone protests and says, "You can't say you *are* a human being!" then she might respond, "If I'm not a human being, which of the six types of sentient beings am I?" If she couldn't say, "I am a human being," she would be going against Chandrakirti's axiom, "Don't lose worldly conventions."

To give another example: As Buddhist philosophers, we say, "That yellow thing is a flower" in accordance with worldly convention, even though there is nothing in that yellow thing that is a flower. Even though the basis of designation (the yellow thing) and the designated object (the flower) are not the same when we analyze, when we speak according to nonanalytical worldly conventions, we can say that and people will understand what we mean. Otherwise, if we always spoke in philosophical language searching for the imputed object, people would get really fed up with us!

These differences are subtle and we need to think well about them to understand. Initially it may seem to be just semantics, but actually there is deep meaning.

Now we can understand the meaning of the definition of the person as the Prasangikas interpret it. In that definition, the collection of the aggregates is the basis of imputation of the mere I, and the mere I is imputed in dependence on that.²³

"mere I is imputed on the continuity of the mental consciousness. That is the basis of designation of the person."

In summary, the person is designated in dependence on the five aggregates in the case of beings in the desire and form realms or on four aggregates in the case of beings in the formless realm. When the aggregates of a particular person appear as an object to the mind, the person is designated in dependence on the aggregates. For example, when we see someone's body approaching, we think, "Susan is coming." When we hear someone's voice, we say, "Fred is talking."

When speaking of the person that goes from one life to another, the continuity of the mental consciousness is the basis of designation of the person. The mental consciousness is what the term *I* refers to. However, the mental consciousness is not the person. Remember, the basis of designation and the designated object are not the same thing, so the basis of designation of the person is not the person. If it were, when we searched for the person in the aggregates that were its basis of designation, we would find something that could be identified as the real person. However, no person is found when searched for in the aggregates.

THE GENERAL I AND THE SPECIFIC I

When we speak of a person, we talk about the general I and the specific I. When we say, "The person is what goes from life to life," we are referring to the general person or the general I. This is the person that is merely imputed in dependence on the aggregates in general. This general I does indeed go from life to life, but not all instances or specific examples of the person go from one life to the next. For example, the person of the past life did not carry on to this life. It ceased at the end of that life. And the person of this life will not go on to the next life. It will cease at the end of this life. But the continuity of the "person that pervades all our lives, past, present, and future" does go on to the next life and to enlightenment, even though there is nothing that can be identified either in the aggregates or separate from them as being this person.

If the person goes from one life to the next, why can't we say the person of the previous life goes to this life? Let's say someone was reborn as a human being named John who lived in England in his previous life. John died and that person's next life is Margaret who lives in the United States. We can't say that John is Margaret, can we? The person called John ceased when he died in England, and a new person, Margaret, was born in the U.S. While

not being the same, these two persons are not totally unrelated. They exist in the same continuity. That continuity is the general I that goes from life to life. John and Margaret and all the other lives that general I has ever lived and will ever live are instances of the general I.

Thus the continuity of the person carries on from the past life to this life, although the specific person of the past life ceased and does not carry on to this life. This means that the person of the past life finished at the end of the past life. But the person at the very last moment of the previous life was the main cause for the first moment of the intermediate state being that followed. After the intermediate state being ceased, the person of this life was born.

Normally we would say, “I died, I entered the intermediate state, and then I was reborn.” The I that we refer to in this case is the general I. The Buddha himself said, “In a previous life, I was King So-and-so.” It is correct to say this. Similarly, since we have been born with precious human lives, we can validly say, “In a past life I must have engaged in virtue, and that is why I have a precious human life in this rebirth.” In both cases, we are speaking about the general I.

However, it would not be correct to say, “That animal is now a human being,” because the specific I that was an animal ceased at the end of the previous life and a specific I that is a human being is born this life. These two specific I’s are different even though they belong to the same continuum and are instances of the same general I.

From the Prasangika viewpoint, the conventional I, the mere I, and the aggregates that are its basis of designation are one entity, although the aggregates are not the self, and the self is not findable within the aggregates. The aggregates of this life and the self of this life are one entity, but the aggregates of this life and the general I are not one entity, because if they were, when the aggregates of this life ceased when the body died, the self would also cease. However, this is not the case. The mere I—which is empty of inherent existence—continues to the next life.