

# Master Asanga on Naming Things

*The following selection is taken from Light on the Path to Freedom: An Explanation of the Steps for Developing an Understanding that Nothing is Itself, a guide to emptiness meditation composed by Choney Lama. It comes from the translation of this text by a member of the SCIM Ancient Text Translation Department, Bets Greer (Ven Utpala).*

## **The Three Reasonings of Master Asanga, on naming things**

[115]

DE YANG, THEG BSDUS LAS,  
 ,MING [f. 7a] GI SNGA ROL BLO MED PHYIR,  
 ,MANG BA'I PHYIR DANG MA 'DRES PHYIR,  
 ,DE YI BDAG NYID BDAG MANG DANG,  
 ,BDAG 'DRES 'GAL BAS GRUB PAR 'GYUR,  
ZHES RIGS PA GSUM BSTAN PA'I

*The Summary of the Greater Way* presents three different forms of reasoning here:

The point is made  
Because of the contradictions  
That it would exist in itself;  
There would be many selves;  
And the selves would be mixed—  
Since there is no thought  
That could come before the name;  
And they would be multiple;  
And they cannot mix together.<sup>1</sup>

[116]

DANG PO NI, LTO LDIR BA SOGS LA RANG RANG GI MING 'JUG PA DE RANG GI  
GNAS TSOD KYIS DBANG GIS 'JUG CING 'JUG GZHI DER RANG GI MTSAN NYID  
KYIS GRUB PA YIN NA,

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<sup>1</sup> *They cannot mix together:* See f. 18b of the work (%S4, TD4048).

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Here's how the first of these reasonings goes. Suppose that when we give a name to something with a rounded belly,<sup>2</sup> or anything of the like, that name applied to the thing by the very nature of the thing; and that the thing which received the name existed by definition.

[117]

LTO LDIR BA CHOS CAN, KHYOD LA BUM PA ZHES PA'I THA SNYAD 'JUG PA DE BRDA LA MI BLTOS PAR THAL, KHYOD BUM PA'O ZHES BRJOD PA'I THA SNYAD KYI GZHIR DNGOS PO'I GNAS TSOD KYI NGOS NAS RANG GI MTSAN NYID KYIS GRUB PA'I PHYIR,

In that case, we'd have to respond with this reasoning:

Consider this thing here, with a rounded belly.

Are you saying that—when we call it a “water pitcher”—this giving it a name doesn't depend upon any term at all?

Because the thing with a rounded belly is called a “water pitcher” just by its very nature: it is a “water pitcher” by definition.

[118]

'DOD NA, LTO LDIR BA LA BUM PA'O SNYAM PA'I BLO SKYE BA DE BRDA LA MI BLTOS PAR SKYE BAR THAL, 'DOD PA DE'I PHYIR,

*Well yes; I agree that giving the water pitcher its name doesn't depend upon any term at all.*

If you do agree, then are you saying that when your mind has the thought about this thing with a rounded belly, “This is a water pitcher,” that you can have this thought without depending on the term “water pitcher”?

*Why do you say that?*

Because you just agreed to that!

[119]

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<sup>2</sup> *Something with a rounded belly:* In ancient India, a very warm place, every room would have a water pitcher on the table. When teachers were teaching these ideas, they would automatically point to something close at hand for an example. And so the water pitcher is a favorite example—and is often referred to as “something with a rounded belly, a flat bottom, and a tapered neck, which also holds water.”

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‘DOD NA, LTO LDIR BA LA BUM PA’O, ZHES MING MA BTAGS PA’I SNGA ROL NAS LTO LDIR BA MTHONG TZAM NYID NAS KYANG ‘DI NI BUM PA’O SNYAM PA’I BLO SKYE BAR THAL LO,,

*Well then, I do agree: When I have the thought “this is a water pitcher,” I do have it without depending on the term “water pitcher.”*

So then, are you saying that—even before you give this thing its name with the thought, “This thing with a rounded belly is a water pitcher”—that you can have the thought “Oh, this is a water pitcher,” even in the very first instant that you lay your eyes on this rounded thing?

[120]

DES NA, LTO LDIR BA CHOS CAN, KHYOD BUM PA’O ZHES BRJOD PA’I THA SNYAD KYI GZHIR RANG GI MTSAN NYID KYIS MA GRUB STE, KHYOD LA BUM PA’O ZHES MING MA BTAGS PA’I GONG ROL NAS DE’O SNYAM PA’I BLO SKYE BA MED PA’I PHYIR RO,,

And so thus it is that we can say:

Take this thing with a rounded belly.

It is *not* the case that it is, by definition, the thing that we apply the name “water pitcher” to;

Because no thought has come up, before we apply the name “water pitcher” to it, which says to itself, “Oh, this thing is a water pitcher.”

[121]

RIGS PA GNYIS PA NI, SKYES BU GCIG LA DBANG PO DANG BRGYA BYIN DANG MIG STONG CAN SOGS MING MI 'DRA BA DU MA BTAGS PA’I TSE MING DE DAG SKYES BU DE LA DNGOS PO’I DBANG GIS 'JUG PAR THAL, DON DE MING DE DAG 'JUG PA’I 'JUG GZHIR RANG GI MTSAN NYID KYIS GRUB PA’I PHYIR,

Let’s look next at the second reasoning.

Now let’s consider a case where we refer to a single being with a variety of different names, such as “The Powerful One,” or

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“Destroyer of a Hundred Cities,” or “One with a Thousand Eyes,” and so on.<sup>3</sup>

Are you saying that all these names apply to this being by the being’s very nature?

Because the fact that the being given these names is the one given the names is something which exists by definition.

[122]

'DOD NA, MING DU MA YIN PA LTAR 'JUG GZHI'I DON YANG DU MA YIN PAR THAL LO,,

*Well then yes, I agree: All these names apply to this being by the being’s very nature.*

If you do agree, then it must be the case that—in the same way that the names are many, the thing they apply to must be many as well.

[123]

DE LTAR THAL BA LAS, DON GCIG MING DU MA'I 'JUG GZHIR RANG GI MTSAN NYID KYIS MA GRUB STE, DON GCIG PO DE DU MAR MI 'GYUR BA'I PHYIR RO,,

Seeing the absurd consequences that thinking the opposite would lead to, we can then say:

It is *not* the case that when a single object serves as what we give multiple names to, it serves this way by definition;

Because a single object couldn’t then become many.

[124]

RIGS PA GSUM PA NI, SKYES BU MI 'DRA BA GNYIS LA BKRA SHIS ZHES MING 'DRA BA GCIG BTAGS PA'I TSE MING DE DON DE GNYIS LA DNGOS DBANG GIS 'JUG PAR THAL, DON MI [f. 7b] 'DRA BA GNYIS PO DE MING GCIG PO 'JUG PA'I 'JUG GZHIR RANG GI GNAS LUGS KYI DBANG GIS GRUB PA'I PHYIR,

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<sup>3</sup> *The Powerful One, and so on:* These are different names for a single worldly god that would be familiar to students in the author’s time who were versed in the ancient Indian literature. “Powerful One” in Sanskrit is “Ishvara”; “Destroyer of a Hundred Cities” is “Shatakratu” (sometimes also called “Indra”); and “One with a Thousand Eyes” is “Sahasraksha.”

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Which brings us to the third reasoning:

Let's consider a case where the same name, "John," is applied to two different people.

Are you saying that this name applies to the two different people by their very nature?

Because these two different people serve as what the single name applies to by their very nature.

[125]

'DOD NA, MING GCIG PA LTAR DON GNYIS KYANG GCIG TU THAL LO, ,

*Then yes, I agree: The name does apply to the two different people by their very nature.*

If you do agree, then the two people must be a single person—in the same way that their name is a single name.

[126]

DE LTAR THAL BA LAS DON GNYIS PO DE CHOS CAN, MING GCIG PO DE 'JUG PA'I 'JUG GZHIR RANG GIS MTSAN NYID KYIS MA GRUB STE, KHYOD MI 'DRA BA'I THA DAD YIN PA'I PHYIR RO,,

Seeing the absurd consequence of this train of thinking, we can instead say:

Let's consider these two people.

The fact that the two of them are what the one name is given to cannot be something that exists by definition;

Because they are in fact two different, separate people.

[127]

'ON KYANG, MDO SDE PA LTAR NA BUM PA ZHES PA'I BRDA'I DNGOS KYI BRJOD BYA RANG GI MTSAN NYID KYIS GRUB NA, BUM PA'O SNYAM PA'I BLO SKYE BA DE BRDA 'BREL BYAS PA LA MI BLTOS PA'I SKYON YOD KYANG,

But let's look at the Sutrists view here. They would agree that there is this problem that—if something were to exist, by definition, as the direct referent of the name "water pitcher"—then when the thought came up in our mind, "Oh, this is a water pitcher," it would not have to rely on having made any connection between the term and the object.

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[128]

DBANG SHES LA LTO LDIR BA DE BUM PA'I MING 'JUG PA'I GZHIR SNANG TSUL  
LTAR RANG GIS MTSAN NYID KYIS GRUB PA LA DE LTA BU'I SKYON MED CES  
SMRA YANG,

At the same time though they would say that the way in which the thing with the rounded belly appears to the sense consciousness as being the thing that the word “water pitcher” applies to is something that exists by definition; and so the problem would not apply, in this sense.

[129]

RNAM RIG PAS DE 'DRA'I KHYAD PAR DBYE MI NUS PAR RIGS PAS 'PHUL [%'BUL?]  
NAS 'GOG PA YIN NO,,

The Mentalists are incapable of making this particular distinction; and so they offer up proofs to deny it.

[130]

BYANG SA DANG BSDU BA GNYIS LAS KYANG DE 'DRA'I RIGS PA BSHAD DE, CHOS  
GZHAN LA'ANG SBYAR BAR BYA'O,,

Both *The Levels of the Bodhisattva* and *The Brief Presentation* cover these kinds of proofs, applying them to other objects as well.