

The Devil Debates an Angel
Course One—The Fight Begins
Class One: Names from Their Own Side (verses 1-29)

1) What is the traditional brief name for the extraordinary classic that we are learning as “The Devil Debates an Angel”? Who wrote this extended poem; when did he live; and how might we summarize his life?

[The traditional brief name of our text is *An Argument with the Tendency to Think that Things are Real*. It was written by His Holiness the First Panchen Lama, Lobsang Chukyi Gyeltsen, who lived 1570-1662. He was above all an extraordinary practitioner, thinker, and meditator; a yogi and a dancer; a poet and writer among the greatest who have ever lived; and an ardent pacifist who once stopped a war single-handedly, by walking out between the opposing armies.]

2) What is the genre of the work that we will be learning; what basic practice does it follow; and how does it reflect three periods of our life?

[The genre of the work that we will be learning is known as Mahamudra, or the Great Seal. This is a practice where we try to come to an understanding of emptiness by observing our own mind in meditation, and grasping how the mind itself—like all other things—is empty of being itself, by itself.

Our text, as its long Tibetan title indicates, starts off from an examination of the Mahamudra—the emptiness of the mind—at three periods during our life.

In a person as they normally are, Mahamudra is the ultimate nature of their own mind, as it has existed for time with no beginning, wrapped in a misunderstanding of how the world exists. All living creatures, from ants to

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high bodhisattvas, have a glimpse of this form of the reality of things each time they die.

Mahamudra as we practice the path is the clear light of death which we imagine in our meditation, trying to use this as a vehicle to understanding emptiness. It is also our intellectual attempts to understand emptiness.

Mahamudra as we reach the fruits of our practice is the direct perception of emptiness, an experience which takes us to the verge of becoming an enlightened Angel who can personally help billions of beings—a state whose core is, again, the emptiness of our own being.]

3) How does the Panchen Lama bridge from his description of the three stages of Mahamudra to the fight between the Angel and the Devil within one person's mind?

[After describing how we perceive emptiness directly in the stage of Mahamudra which relates to the fruits of our practice (a state also known as the “path of seeing”), His Holiness describes our journey beyond this to the path of habituation (where we learn to use emptiness to remove our negativities forever) and further to enlightenment itself.

Here we reach the ability to know all things: “We see all the things that exist, plain as a marble in the palm of our hand, and yet still never waver from the way that all things are.” That is, we simultaneously see all things in the universe—past, present, and future—while miraculously perceiving, directly, the ultimate truth of each of them at the very same time.

Once here, our previous prayers and the wishes of those we will help cause us to appear in billions of enlightened forms, to help people.

But, says His Holiness, we must remember that even these forms are only but appearances—projections of the mind—and not coming from themselves. It would be the ultimate mistake to think otherwise, to think that they are themselves in this sense, of coming from themselves.

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And so the Angel of Wisdom must politely ask that the Devil of thinking that things do come from themselves to leave the mind—and thus the fight begins.]

4) How does the Tendency to Think that Things are Themselves respond to Wisdom's first salvo? What do you think of his answer?

[This Devil points out to Wisdom that the Devil has been the mind's companion for time with no beginning, and that during all that time he has shown the mind the love of a parent, making sure that the person gets all the things they need— food and clothes and everything else.

Here our habit of misunderstanding things is taking credit for whatever degree we have been able to fulfill all our endless wants. The part about being responsible for endless wants is true—at least, for wanting things in an ignorant way.

That is, our habit of misunderstanding believes that the way to get the things we want is to take them, at the expense of others—to compete for the things of the world. But this wanting is not the reason that we have ever succeeded in getting things; rather, it is because we gave them first to others.

And so ignorance can't take credit for our legitimate hopes and wishes (those which are fulfilled by serving others); nor can it take credit for their having come true. He hasn't really loved us, or served us.]

5) How does Wisdom answer the claim that misunderstanding and the mind have been constant companions forever? What clever reply does Misunderstanding give, and how can we justify the Angel's radical rejoinder?

[Wisdom says that for two companions to have enjoyed each other's company for time with no beginning, they must both have been things that existed in the first place. That is, we can't talk about a relationship between two things if one or both of them doesn't exist.

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Wisdom says then that neither friends in this supposed relationship *ever* existed—neither the mind, nor the Tendency to Think that Things are Themselves.

The Tendency responds to this cleverly, accusing Wisdom of a classical mistake in the study of emptiness: we are not to underestimate the existence of things; just because they are empty of being themselves by themselves, that doesn't mean they don't exist at all.

The Devil in fact assumes the guise of a very proper Middle Wayer: he says that his existence cannot be denied, because he does exist nominally—meaning, that he does exist as a projection created by the seeds of what we have done in the past.

The Angel then makes a very radical statement, asserting that this Devil of ignorance never even existed *nominally*, as a projection. Since this is not, strictly speaking, true, we need to think a bit about what Wisdom is getting at.

We have to get into the Devil's head here. He has heard the Middle-Way arguments about things being empty—about them not existing in and of themselves. And he has heard about how this doesn't mean that they don't exist at all; for they do, but only as a projection of our mind, born of the seeds of how we have treated others. And so he is claiming the right to exist as a product of our seeds.

But even as he says it, *the Devil is holding himself to be himself*: even as he says that he is coming from the seeds, he is holding that he exists in and of himself. When the Devil claims to exist nominally, what he believes, at the same time, is that he exists *nominally from his own side*.]

Coffee shop assignment: Please meet with at least one other person—or better, a group of people—whom you didn't know well before this teaching; do your homework together and discuss together any questions you have. Please write here where, when, and with whom you did your homework:

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Meditation assignment: 15 minutes early in the day, and 15 minutes later in the day, trying to recreate the opening blows between Wisdom and Misunderstanding inside your own mind. Then identify this Misunderstanding in your own mind and try to perceive the role it is playing in the greatest challenge in your life right now. Please write here the two times that you started these meditations:

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Class Two: This Town Ain't Big Enough
for Both of Us (verses 29-42)

1) Describe the realm over which the Devil of Misunderstanding claims to reign, and why he thinks that he does so.

[We will remember that the Devil of Misunderstanding (another name for the Tendency to Think That Things are Themselves) had said to Wisdom that he had been associated with the mind for beginningless time. And Wisdom had replied that something which didn't exist couldn't associate with anybody.

The Devil then cleverly responded that—although he understood how he could not exist in an ultimate sense, from his own side—he did still exist in a nominal sense, if we didn't look too closely. That is, Misunderstanding does exist as a projection coming from the seeds inside our mind.

In this sense, says Misunderstanding, he is part of that huge family of normal objects all around us all the time; and he claims to hold reign over them, probably because in our current state of understanding most of these objects cause us suffering. These are the objects that—as Master Nagarjuna would have put it—exhibit the normal workings of the world.

His Holiness the First Panchen Lama describes these objects in three different ways. First of all, they are all those things which rely upon other things: what Buddhists sometimes call “dependent origination.” This is just a fancy way of saying that everything depends on something else; in its highest interpretation, it is the fact that the appearance of everything around us depends upon seeds that we have put in our minds by how we have treated others.

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Second, they are things which do things and the things which they do: anything which works. And, as we will see, things can only do what they do—things can only work—if they are imbued with the power to do so by, again, the seeds within our mind.

Third, the things around us are things where one of them causes another: they exhibit cause and effect. But again, what forges the mysterious connection between causes and their results is the images set forth by the seeds within our minds.]

2) The Angel of Wisdom is trying to tell us that we are looking at everything around us in the wrong way. What are two problems that the Angel says come up with things if we believe that they are coming from their own side—if they are, in fact, themselves?

[In verses 31 and 32, His Holiness the First Panchen Lama mentions some 12 different problems that would come up with things if they were to exist in the way that we habitually believe that they do. Let's look at two of these problems.

The first is that—if things existed “out there,” on their own—then they could “never change,” as His Holiness puts it. When we see a rose bud open and then slowly bloom into a full flower, we tend to think that this is happening by itself, whether we were there or not.

If though we try to “catch” a moment of change, we see that it's impossible: every moment in which the rose goes from slightly smaller to slightly bigger should have some duration; if it didn't, then we couldn't be aware of it. But there are limits to the duration that we can perceive: the rose getting ever so slightly bigger that we cannot perceive the change.

We accept that there should be imperceptible changes in the size of the rose, but we believe that we can perceive “lumps” of these tiny changes put together, into a bigger change. We though couldn't perceive a bigger change without observing smaller changes: we can't see a thing unless we can see its smaller parts first.

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What's really happening then is that a seed for a larger rose is opening within our own mind, replacing a smaller rose that came from a previous seed. The change in things is coming from us: it has to come from us.

A second example here is quite easy: the idea that if things were *not* coming from us, then they would have to exist "by their very nature." Here we can just think of our favorite song. If it were a "good" song without depending on seeds within our own mind, then it would sound good by its very nature.

This means that it would have to emanating "sounding good" from its own side, and then it would have to sound good to everybody, which of course it doesn't. What's really happening is that seeds in our own mind—planted there when we spoke sweetly and kindly to someone else—are opening and making us hear the song as beautiful.

As the Angel says it, this shows that things are "relying on others," meaning that they rely upon the seeds within our mind.]

3) In verse 34, the Angel presents a very important idea which will become a theme throughout the entire battle. This is the idea of "two incompatible things, like a single thing hot and cold." Discuss what this incompatibility refers to in the present verse, and relate it to a popular saying from cowboy movies.

[The Angel wants us to get the picture of how it's impossible for two incompatible things to exist in the same place at the same time: where the hero in a western tells the bad guy, "There ain't room in this town for both of us." (By the way, this is usually followed by "...and I ain't leavin'," which is exactly what the Angel is saying.)

We can easily picture this if we imagine a pot on the stove whose handle is both too hot to touch and too cold to touch at the same time. Can't happen (at least, relative to one person's perceptions).

There are actually two incompatible things being described in this verse. One is that things could both depend on other things, and not depend on other things, at the same time. In the highest interpretation of what it means to "depend," this would mean that something was both coming from

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the seeds in our own mind, and not coming from these seeds at the same time, which is impossible.

But then the Angel ties this to the incompatible ways that Misunderstanding and Wisdom think of things. That is, the state of mind which thinks that things can't be coming from me and the state of mind which thinks that they are are two incompatible states of mind.

And that's why the Angel and the Devil cannot stay in the same mind at the same time. If we just work on seeing how things are coming from us, then we can rid our mind of the Devil, and all the negativities that he brings to us (we'll be meeting those later).]

4) His Holiness the First Panchen Lama interrupts the flow of his poem to quote a line of prose from Master Chandrakirti's extensive commentary to Master Aryadeva's *400 Verses on the Deeds of Bodhisattva Yogis*. This line is actually an excellent explanation of the word "emptiness," and its relationship to how we behave towards others. Explain why.

[The line in question (at verse 37) says: "When we speak of a 'self-nature' that a thing could possess, what we're talking about is a quality in a thing where it never had to rely on anything else. The absence of this is what we mean when we say that 'nothing is itself'."

That is, to arrive at emptiness we first have to imagine something that could exist without relying on anything else: something that had a nature or quality of not relying on anything else. When we see that this thing is not possible, then we've arrived at emptiness.

And so we would have to try to imagine something that didn't come from the seeds in our own mind, planted there by our behavior towards others.

In a moral sense, we can all sense the problem here. We all crave a sense of justice to the universe, where the things that happen to us and the people we meet are coming to us logically—where we get what we give, and nothing else, good or bad.

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If there is a single thing or person that we meet with which we didn't deserve—which were not coming to us from the seeds in our mind, planted there by how we treat others—then there is no logic to the universe, and anything can happen. And then there is no hope for us to be happy really.

The fact though that there is no such thing is emptiness, and we can see now how comforting this really is.]

5) In verse 42, the Tendency to Think that Things are Themselves claims that if the mind did manage to expel him, then the mind would “lose its oldest friend,” and then become unable to find any more friends after that. Why is he saying this, and why is he very, very wrong, especially in terms of our personal relationships?

[The Devil here is referring to the idea that we must “take care of number one”: that we can only get things if we *get* them, and not *give* them. He is saying that we have to watch out for ourselves. Let's relate this idea to a relationship.

Say that we are looking for someone to be in a relationship with. Our usual thinking is that we will have to make some kind of effort—to put ourselves out there, to go to clubs or yoga classes or get on the internet to find the kind of person we really want. And we really are concentrating on what we want.

We can say that thinking we can find someone this way is “Devil Thinking.” And we really do feel that if we stopped this kind of thinking—if we didn't make any efforts to go out there and get someone—then we really would, as the Devil says, never be able to find more friends in the future.

The Angel is suggesting a different approach. He wants us to understand that if we do meet a new friend it is only coming from a seed within our own mind. And that seed can only be planted by providing companionship to someone else; for example, by spending some time with an elderly person every week or two. If we do plant this seed, then we will find our own companion, whether we go to yoga or go on line—they have to come.

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If this is true, then the Devil in this verse is very wrong. He is suggesting that we need to take care of ourselves, to concentrate on our own needs, to fulfill them. This kind of thinking, again, derives from his most basic misunderstanding—his belief that things are coming from their own side. If we continue to follow his advice, and seek companionship without providing it to others, then we really will be without it in the future.]

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Meditation assignment: 15 minutes early in the day, and 15 minutes later in the day, thinking of people or events in our life right now that we might be seeing in the wrong way: as coming from their own side, rather than from the seeds in our mind. That is, getting used to what a thing that comes from its own side (which is impossible) looks like. Please write here the two times that you started these meditations: