

Abhidharma

Course on Abhidharma – June 7 to July 2

Khenpo Jamyang Tenzin will present a detailed line by line explanation of Gorampa's authoritative summary of Abhidharma directly in English. The main topic in question is how our senses interact with different objects to produce the various consciousnesses. The third section is a very interesting examination of the difficult points of the aggregates, specially the 4th and 5th, that of volition and consciousness. Here he delineates the different types and levels of mind.

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Opening the Door to All Knowable Objects: Aggregates, Spheres of Perception and Sources of Perception, by Künkhyen Gorampa.

Introduction to Abhidharma

The Abhidharma is a unique feature of Buddhism. It is one of the three crucial categories of the Buddhist teaching and makes up the training of higher knowledge, the source of all Buddhist Philosophies throughout all schools and periods. Literally, Abhidharma means "higher Dharma", and is a systematic categorization of phenomena in a clear and detailed way. The Abhidharma text is "nominal Abhidharma". The actual Abhidharma is the Transcendental Wisdom that realizes the non-existence of "self".

Course

Khenpo Jamyang Tenzin will present a detailed line by line explanation of Gorampa's authoritative summary of Abhidharma directly in English. This commentary delves on the "meaning" of both the upper and lower Abhidharmas. Lower Abhidharma in the Tibetan tradition refers to the Sautrāntika vision of Abhidharma as explained in Vasubandhu's exhaustive treatment of the subject in his commentary, the Abhidharmakośha. Upper Abhidharma refers to the Yogācāra vision of Abhidharma as explained in Asaśa's commentary, Abhidharmasamuccaya, The Compendium Of Higher Teaching.

Topics Covered

Künkhyen Gorampa wrote this text with 3 main objectives in mind. First he explains the purpose behind Buddha's presentation of all phenomena in the 3 categories: the 5 aggregates (skandhas), 12 sources of perception (ayatana) and 18 elements (dhatus). The second section is the bulk of the text where he explains clearly these 3 categorization schemes and their relationship to one another. The main topic in question is how our senses interact with different objects to produce the various consciousnesses. The third section is a very interesting examination of the difficult points of the aggregates, specially the 4th and 5th, that of volition and consciousness. Here he delineates the different types and levels of mind.

Benefit

Abhidharma's main aim is to install wisdom, the main tool to develop our practice. The study of Abhidharma instills the basic and precise knowledge of all phenomena, which is an indispensable aid to developing wisdom, especially regarding the conventional nature of all knowable objects. The object of the Abhidharma is to know how samsara functions and therefore to understand how to become free of it. By mapping out the training towards higher knowledge, it leads one to an understanding of both sutras and tantras.

As was said by Buddhaghosa,

"Those who study the Abhidharma literature experience unending joy and serenity of mind."
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Künkhyen Gorampa - a short biography

The great omniscient Gorampa Sönam Senge was born as the son of father Rutsha Shenkyab and mother Gyalwa Men in the Tibetan Earth Bird Year, i.e., 1429. As a child Sönam Senge mastered reading effortlessly. When he attained the age of ten, Sönam Senge reflected that all living beings who dwell in the world are afflicted by many various kinds of sufferings. Hence, he resolved to renounce the world and begged his parents' permission to do so.

When his parents had given him their consent he was given the vows of a novice monk by the abbot Jangchub Sempa Kunga Bum. It was then that he was given the name, Sönam Senge. Then he began formally to study Buddhist philosophy under the abbot Kunga Bbum. He was introduced to logic and began to commit texts to memory. He was remarkably diligent and soon excelled among the students of Kunga Bum.

By the time Sönam Senge had attained the age of nineteen, he had mastered the wide variety of texts, including the texts of logic and Pramāṇa. It was then that an overwhelming desire took hold of him to go to Central Tibet in search of further instruction in the holy Dharma. Thus, he set about gathering together travelling companions and provision for the journey.

At the beginning of the following year, he left his native land together with many young students. Travelling via the Konglam they eventually reached Samye, then Sangphu, and finally Lhasa. At all the holy places along their route, Sönam

Senge offered prayers.

In the summer of the same year, he came to the Monastery of Nalendra, where the renowned scholar Rongtön was teaching. He was received by the master and was greatly pleased. At that time, a great number of students had assembled to hear discourses from the great Rongtön. Sönam Senge developed a firm faith in the master and decided to remain at Nalendra equalled the most gifted students in intellectual ability.

In the autumn Sönam Senge proceeded to Lhasa, where he met the scholar, Ling Men Pandita Sherab Paldenpa from whom he received the gama of the Mañju[r+-n masaCg+ta. Sherab Paldenpa also taught him the biographies of a number of great teachers, including that of Rongtön.

Sönam Senge could not study with great Rongtön, because the master, unfortunately passed away that very year. Then, hearing of a very excellent scholar, called Sangye Phel who was teaching at the institute of Dreyul, Sönam Senge decided to go there to pursue his studies of the doctrine. At the institute of Dreyul, he studied advanced philosophy under the scholar Sangye Phel. There too, all were amazed by his extra-ordinary intelligence.

After Sönam Senge had been at the institute of Dreyul he conceived the idea of going to the great Monastery of Ngor Ewam Chöde to study tantra under the famous Dorjechang Kunga Zangpo.

At Ewam Chöde he was ordained by the master Kunga Zangpo at the age of twenty six. There, Sönam Senge studied tantra under Kunga Zangpo and his successor Könchog Gyaltshe. In addition, he studied ethics at Ewam Chöde. It is said that he not only mastered all the instructions which he received, but also practised them.

In the Iron Dragon Year, i.e., 1461, when Sönam Senge was thirty two years old, he left Ewam Chöde, in the company of his elder half brother, with the intention of returning to Kham to visit his parents and practise meditation. On their way to Kham, they stopped at the institute Dreyul where Sönam Senge had studied philosophy under Sangye Phel.

Sönam Senge distinguished himself as the foremost among all the learned scholars there in philosophical debate. His skill in debate amazed all who were present, particularly because he had for many years devoted himself primarily to the study of tantra. As the result of his success, the head of the institute, Sangye Phel, asked Sönam Senge to remain there to study and teach. Though he was unwilling to remain, he was eventually persuaded to do so through the intervention of Kömchog Gyaltshe. Sönam Senge then remained at the institute of Dreyul while his half brother proceeded alone to Kham. Not long after the two of the senior instructors at the institute left to pursue their studies in different parts of Tibet, Sönam Senge then assumed the role of assistant teacher at the institute.

When the head of the institute Sangye Phel, left to receive additional tantric instructions from Könchog Gyaltshe, he asked Sönam Senge to act as the head of the institute in his absence. After Sangye Phel's departure, Sönam Senge taught the texts of P ramit , logic, Vinaya and Abhidharma at the institute. The knowledge of the students at the institute increased markedly during the course of his teaching. As a result, his fame spread throughout Central Tibet. It was then that he composed among other works, a commentary on the Sdom-gsum Rab-dbye of Sakya Pandita and a summary of P ramit . When Sangye Phel returned to the institute, Sönam Senge went to Ewam Chöde at the request of Könchog Gyaltshe. There he continued his studies under Könchog Gyaltshe, meditated, taught and composed a number of biographies and works on tantra. He became acquainted with Sönam Chökyi Kunga Tashi Gyaltshe Pal Zangpo who suggested that Sönam Senge found a monastic institute of his own. Sönam Senge accepted the suggestion and together they resolved to found an institute in the near future. Shortly thereafter, Sönam Senge first found a small monastic institute at Tanag Serling in upper Tsang.

Sönam Senge founded his institute at Tanag Serling with the objective of furthering the study of Buddhist religion and philosophy in Tibet. The method of instruction pursued at the institute conformed to the tradition which had been established by Rongtön and other masters of Sakya doctrine.

Eventually a permanent location was found for the institute at Tanag Rinchen Tse and in 1474, Sönam Senge took up his residence there. He named the monastery Thubten Namgyal. At Thubten Namgyal, Sönam Senge taught logic and P ramit with detailed explanations. He also taught Vinaya and composed works on sktra and tantra.

Among others he taught the following texts: the Abhisamay laCk ra, with its commentary composed by Haribhadra, the Abhidharmako[a of Vasubandhu, the Abhidharmasamuccaya of AsaEga, the five principal texts of the Madhyamaka system taught by N g rjuna, the Catu%[ataka of Aryadeva, the Madhyamak vat ra of Candrak+rti, the Bodhicaryav t ra of Z ntideva, the Pram Gavarttika of Dharmakirti, the Sdom-gsum Rab-dbye and the Tshad-ma Rigs-gter of Sakya Pandita. Sönam Senge taught all these texts from memory, along with detailed explanations. In addition, he taught numerous tantric texts, including three Hevajra Tantras, the CakrasaCvaratantra and Gu%yasam jatantra with its commentary composed by Candrak+rti, the Pradipoddyotana.

Sönam Senge wrote numerous works, including several texts on the p ramit s, a commentary on the Pram navarttika, a commentary on the Tshad-ma Rigs-gter of Sakya Pandita, a commentary on the Mklamadhyamakak rik , a commentary on the Madhyamak vat ra, an exposition of Madhyamaka system entitled the Dbu-ma-spyi-don, a summary of the five

treatises of N g rjuna and the like. In addition he composed many works on tantra. Sönam Senge was moreover a skilled debator who vanquished many opponents in philosophical disputations.

Sönam Senge also later assumed the post of abbot of the Ewam Chöde Monastery. He held the post for four years. There he delivered many tantric teachings, most notably that of the Lamdre. Throughout the year during which he held the post of abbot of the Ewam Chöde Monastery, he continued to look after his own monastery of Thubten Namgyal, dividing his time between the two insitutions.

In 1490, while returning to Thubten Namgyal from his second visit to Sakya, Sönam Senge passed away. His cremated remains were enshrined at Thubten Namgyal.