

Self-liberators

Superior to Hearers and Inferior to Bodhisattvas



A Happy Monks Publication

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May I attain liberation when the buddhas do not appear
and the hearers have left.

May my transcendental wisdom arise without
dependence on external teachers and teachings.

May I be able to attain the profound ability of teaching the
dharma without words.¹

Preface

Self-liberator arhats are the lesser known, somewhat mystical, practitioners, who are superior to hearers but are inferior to bodhisattvas. They are motivated enough to work for the dharma and sentient beings that they meditate for one hundred aeons to have more qualities, but their final aim is still personal liberation.

In their last life they attain the self-generated transcendental wisdom without the condition of an external teacher, and they possess the ability of teaching the dharma non-verbally.

This material is based on Lama Tsong Khapa's *Rosary of Eloquent Speech*, Jetsun-Cho-gi Gyaltzen's *General Explanation of the Perfections* and Jetsun-Cho-gi Gyaltzen's *General Explanation of the Middle Way*.

I have attempted to extract some points regarding self-liberators, primarily from the Prasangika point of view, and not from the Svatantrika point of view that is common to *The Rosary of Eloquent Speech* and *The General Explanation of the Perfections*. Any faults are entirely mine.

From Nagarjuna's *Root Wisdom*:

*When the perfect Buddhas do not appear
And all the hearers have left,
The transcendental wisdom of a self-made Buddha
Arises intensely without dependence.*

Self-liberators

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Introduction

In Buddhism there are two basic paths, the Hinayana and the Mahayana, which are differentiated by the motivation that drives the practitioner. If one's practice is powered by the wish mainly wanting to attain liberation for oneself alone then it is a Hinayana path. This does not mean the practitioner is devoid of compassion, but they lack great compassion, which can only be generated by meditating on the seven point cause and effect method or the method of exchanging self and others. Their ultimate aim is liberation of self, and not the liberation of all sentient beings.

If one is, however, motivated by great compassion and the altruistic wish wanting to liberate all sentient beings, and one directs one's practice towards complete enlightenment, then it becomes a Mahayana path.

The Hinayana path is subdivided into the path of the hearer and the path of the self-liberator, and the Mahayana path is subdivided into the path of sutra and the path of tantra. Within the hearer family are twenty types of practitioners, who are referred to as the Twenty Sangha.

Within the self-liberator family there are three basic types of practitioner:

1. The rhinoceros-like self-liberator
2. The great self-liberator of communal practice
3. The small self-liberator of communal practice

However, some categories of the Twenty Sangha do also apply to self-liberators.

Why do certain individuals feel inclined to enter and follow the path of the self-liberator? The answer seems to lie in what is called lineage, i.e. a propensity to follow this particular path. One enters the self-liberator's family and becomes a trainee self-liberator when the self-liberator lineage is awakened. This happens when spontaneous renunciation aiming for the liberation of a self-liberated arhat is generated in the mental continuum of the practitioner.

These practitioners are of a particular character and have their own way of practising and teaching the dharma.

Character

Rhinoceros-like self-liberators have three character traits.

One, they are loners. Because of having fewer afflictions they do not like excitement and rather prefer to be alone.

Two, in comparison to a bodhisattva, they have little compassion and do not do much for others and thus abide within limited mental activity.

Three, they are of mediocre ability and practise proudly.

Being of mediocre mental ability means their mental capacity is superior to that of a hearer, but inferior to that of a bodhisattva.

Within the self-liberator family the rhinoceros-like self-liberator is of sharp faculty, the great self-liberator of communal practice is of mediocre faculty and the small self-liberator of communal practice is of dull faculty. To practise proudly means that they want to manifest their awakening without depending on other teachers.

Apart from the characteristic of preferring to be alone, all the other features apply to the self-liberators of communal practice as well.

Ability

From Chandrakirti's *Self-commentary on the Introduction to the Middle Way*:

They are distinguished from hearers by the qualities of strongly increased merits and transcendental wisdom and they are inferior to perfectly enlightened buddhas, since they do not possess the accumulation of merits and transcendental wisdom, great compassion and omniscient understanding. Therefore they are 'medium'.

From Jetsun-Cho-gi Gyaltzen's *General Explanation of the Middle Way*:

There is a reason why self-liberators are described as 'medium realisers of suchness' - because self-liberators are superior to hearers and inferior to complete buddhas.

The first is established - because self-liberators can span their meditation on the path over one hundred eons and hearers cannot span their meditation on the path over one hundred eons. This reflects the meaning of 'by the qualities of strongly increased merits and transcendental wisdom'.

Self-buddhas are inferior to complete buddhas - because self-buddhas have not completed the accumulations of merit and transcendental wisdom, do not have great compassion that always engages with sentient beings, do not have omniscient knowledge and so forth.

Mode of practice

Both types of self-liberators² have a strong belief in the profound dharma, put great effort into realising profound dependent arising and meditate on the three doors of liberation³. Their main objects of meditation are the subtle selflessnesses of the person and phenomena and their main objects of abandonment are the afflictive obscurations, which are true-grasping, the afflictions arising from it, and their seeds.

Physically, rhinoceros-like self-liberators abide within solitude, while communal practitioners prefer to have companions around while they practise. When they go into the city both keep their body extremely restrained, the door of the senses under control and they are always mindful. They go to the city on alms round and show their psychic powers to subdue disciples.

The self-liberators of rhinoceros-like practise, after having entered the family of self-liberators, enjoy the presence of buddhas for one hundred eons, during which they work on ripening their continuum to become ready for self-awakening.

To attain their self-awakening they subsequently become proficient in the six subjects of:

- Aggregates
- Spheres
- Sources
- Dependent arising
- Being and not being a vessel
- Truths

During all that time they remain on the path of accumulation. In the following life they then progress from the heat level of

the path of preparation through the remaining two learner paths to the path of no-more-learning.

The great self-liberators of communal practise enjoy the presence of a buddha and progress up to including the patience level of the path of preparation under the guidance of a teacher. They are, however, unable to realise emptiness directly in that life and are unable attain the various fruits of stream enterer and so forth. To be able to do so in the next life they become adept in meditating on the six subjects of the aggregates and so on.

The small self-liberators of communal practise enjoy the presence of a buddha as well and progress up to including the fruit of a stream enterer or a once returner under the guidance of a teacher. They, however, do not attain the fruits of no-returner and arhat in that lifetime. To be able to do so in the next life they become adept in meditating on the six subjects of the aggregates and so on.

Attainment of the final result

A distinct feature of these practitioners is that they have the strength of mind and are courageous enough to work for one hundred eons in order to attain liberation in a barbaric country in order to propagate the dharma there.

Through the force of prayers they take rebirth in their final lifetime in cyclic existence in a barbaric place without teachers and teachings, because of wanting to propagate the dharma there. They have the strength of mind to accumulate merits for one hundred eons to be able to do that.

Through the force of intense practice for one hundred eons in the preceding lives they naturally realise the sequential and

reverse order of the afflicted and purified twelve links of dependent origination, and the liberating transcendental wisdom is self-generated in their continuum.

But because they aim to remain in absorption on cessation after their death they are inferior to bodhisattvas, who are willing to work for sentient beings as long as needed. Bodhisattvas outshine both hearers and self-liberators through the force of their bodhicitta.

The rhinoceros-like self-liberator can realise the complete path of preparation, the path of seeing, the path of meditation and the path of no-more-learning in that final life, and is therefore regarded as the sharpest. The great communally practising self-liberator realises the fourth path of preparation, the supreme dharma, and the remaining three paths in that final lifetime and is therefore regarded as being of mediocre capacity. The inferior communally practising self-liberator realises the remaining fruits up to the fruit of arhat in that life and is therefore the dullest.

During that final life self-liberators primarily teach the dharma silently through body language and their psychic powers. That is why it is said that there are no self-liberators who are tenet propounders.

Self-liberated arhats are also referred to as those with medium awakening or as middling buddhas. They have abandoned the afflictive obscurations and as such have attained nirvana - liberation from suffering. They have, however, more merits and therefore more qualities than hearer arhats because of having meditated on the path for one hundred eons.

The nirvana of a self-liberator is their mind's suchness, possessing the purity of the abandonment of the two types of

true-grasping with their seeds. That suchness of the mind of a self-liberated arhat in meditative equipoise is nirvana without remainder. The same suchness in the mind of an arhat during the post-meditational period is nirvana with remainder⁴.

From the *Ornament of Clear Realisation* by Maitreya:

Because of realising suchness naturally
Others do not need to show it as well.
The rhinoceros-like transcendental wisdom
Clearly expresses only the profound.

The transcendental wisdom of the rhinoceros-like self-liberator is endowed with the two profundities of knowledge and non-expression and is profounder than profound.

The profundity of knowledge refers to realisation during meditative equipoise of the inexpressible, which they do not need to be shown by others. The profundity of non-expression is the non-reliance on speech to teach the dharma during the post-meditational period. They induce others to practise the ten virtuous actions etc. by teaching the dharma silently, through the force of their transcendental wisdom and so on.

The transcendental wisdom of hearers is profound because of realising the sixteen aspects of the four noble truths after being taught them by others. The transcendental wisdom of rhinoceros-like self-liberator arhats however is more profound, because of realising the same without being taught.

Teaching the Dharma

The way self-liberated arhats teach the dharma is profounder than that of a hearer because they teach the dharma mostly non-verbally.

From Haribadra's *Clear Meaning*:

Even though there is no sound, the meaning of the realisation appears to the disciples in the aspect they wished to listen to it. It is not paradoxical that self-buddhas teach the dharma non-verbally because they can generate the concordant realisation in the disciple's mind even though there is no sound. The meaning of teaching the dharma is to generate within the mind of the disciple the dharma to be expressed.

It is not paradoxical to say that one can teach the dharma non-verbally. If the purpose of the words is to generate the realisation in the consciousness of the disciple, self-liberators are able to accomplish that silently, through the force of previous prayers and their transcendental wisdom.

During their training they see that the conceptual motivational thought required for speech acts as a distraction, interrupting the continuity of their concentration. They then make prayers to be able to teach the dharma without words. The fruit of those prayers is the self-liberated arhat's ability to generate realisations in the continuum of the students by teaching them the dharma silently, without the mental distraction of motivational conceptual thoughts. Rather, they can generate the understanding of the desired dharma knowledge in the disciples' minds through physical expressions like gestures and also magical emanations.

In that they are not alone, because buddhas also can teach the dharma without words as a result of prayers made while practising the bodhisattva path. However, since a buddha's mind is free from conceptualisation, they can teach verbally without the continuity of their concentration being interrupted.

Direct disciples of the Buddha

Jetsun-Cho-gi Gyaltsen says:

Even though there are self-liberators that become direct disciples of a supreme emanation body there are not any self-liberators at the end of their existence or self-liberated arhats that become the direct disciples of a supreme emanation body. In the same way there are self-liberators that become tenet proponents but there are not any self-liberators at the end of their existence or self-liberated arhats that become tenet proponents-because from the 'great tantric stages': 'Self-buddhas are not classified as any of the four tenet proponents'.

Further:

It follows there are self-liberators that become direct disciples of a supreme emanation body - because there were self-liberators in the audience when the supreme emanation body praised bodhisattvas - because in that audience were beings belonging to all three families.

So the quote, 'When the perfect buddhas do not appear' refers to the fact that self-liberators at the end of their samsaric continuum take rebirth in a land without a buddha or hearers, and it does not contradict the existence of self-liberators in the audience of a supreme emanation body.

Otherwise it would contradict the statement that rhinoceros-like self-liberators enjoy the presence of buddhas for one hundred eons.

Svatrantika Madhyamaka

According to the Svatantrika Madhyamaka the three types of self-liberators do not need to build up the collections for one hundred eons. Here, the rhinoceros-like self-liberator builds up the accumulations for one hundred eons, but the self-liberator of communal practice does not have to do so. According to them, a stream-enterer abandoning the afflictions simultaneously who does not become an arhat in that lifetime becomes a self-liberator in the next life if there is not a buddha present that next life.

This is however refuted by Chandrakirti, who referred to self-liberators as:

Those in the definite nature of self-enlightenment.

This shows that self-liberators on the path of accumulation abide within their lineage from the outset and that there are not any self-liberators who have first been hearers.

Etymology

The rhinoceros-like self-liberators are called such because they do not mix with other householders, ordained ones, or even other self-liberators. Instead they remain solitary, like a rhinoceros. The self-liberators of communal practice are called such because they practise together with others.

In general both are called self-buddhas or self-awakened ones because they become enlightened⁵ for their own

purpose alone, and they do this through the self-generated transcendental wisdom that arises in their continuum during their final lifetime, without the conditions of external teachers and teachings.

The 'self' in self-liberator is related by Lama Tsong Khapa in his *Golden Rosary of Eloquent Speech* in these two ways, a meaning that is lost if the term solitary realizer is used for rang-gyal.

SARVA MANGALAM

The merit arising from the compilation of this booklet is dedicated to the long and healthy life of Ven Lama Zopa Rinpoche, Khen-rinpoche Lama Lundrub, Ven Geshe Jampa Teckchok, Geshe Doga and Geshe Dawö.

May they remain until samsara's end, with aspects brimming with health and strength, and continually teach us sutra and tantra.

¹ I do not have a literal source for the exact words of these prayers beyond my teacher, but they seem to reflect the meaning of the payers a self-liberator is said to be doing.

² Rhinoceros like self-liberator and communal self-liberator

³ Empty, signless and wishless; respectively lack of inherent existence of identity, cause and effect.

⁴ An individual analyzed cessation having fully abandoned the afflictive obscurations is the definition of nirvana. According to the Svatantrika the remainder is a remainder of suffering aggregates.

⁵ There are three enlightenments: that of the hearer, that of the self-liberator, and the complete enlightenment of a buddha. While the first two are also called 'enlightenment', only the complete enlightenment of a perfect buddha is actual enlightenment.