THE SELF-IMAGE

Tarthang Tulku, Rinpoche
Berkeley, California

This article is an edited transcription of a talk given by Tarthang Tulku at the Tibetan Nyingma Institute in Berkeley, California, spring 1974.

In the Tibetan tradition, consciousness is pictured as a physical reaction. What a human being is inside is the same as what he or she is outside in the physical realm. A human being is the embodiment of his consciousness. A person's characteristic behavior patterns—his obsessions, his dullness, his unhappiness, or his feelings of great fulfillment—are all manifested on the physical level. We may say that a person is really functioning properly as a human being when his consciousness is well-balanced.

If we observe our constant play of thoughts and ideas, we will find that we have many thoughts and many conceptions about who or what we are. Our thoughts are so much involved with a self-image. We expect ourselves to behave in certain ways. We see ourselves sitting in a certain way, or wearing certain kinds of clothes, or talking in a certain manner. These expressions of individual characteristics take on a separate form—a separate personality—which is different from who we actually are. First we create thoughts or thought-models which feed our consciousness. Then our consciousness immediately becomes involved in the world of our self-image. But when we examine it, the self-image doesn't show itself. It cannot be pinpointed as
anything. It disperses: it is nothing. True, you may have con-
cepts about a certain self-image you may have at a certain
time, but there is no one particular self-image that outlasts any
conceptions you may have about it.

We think and talk as though we could actually touch or see our
self-image. However, two separate qualities are involved: our
'self,' or 'me' or 'I' ... and our self-image. This 'me' or 'I' is
involved with life in a multitude of ways. This 'I' experiences
and feels and sees things in a way which is very alive and
immediate. When this 'I' becomes filled with the self-image,
the person begins to act as though he were someone else. For
example, perhaps you are tremendously shy, or you feel very
shameful, embarrassed, guilty or generally dissatisfied—at this
time the 'I' is overcome with a very vivid, very alive sensation
which is really only the activation of a personal drama, the
self-image.

We can think, examine, meditate, and maybe make very clear
to ourselves what kind of status we are giving to this self-image.
Let us say you are watching your thoughts and emotions dur-
ing some tremendous disturbance, some great sadness. Your
mind is very agitated. At these times you might be able to
observe that you are not actually the person who is experienc-
ing this emotional state. You are not actually the person that is
feeling great pain. These disturbances are being created
through the operation of your self-image. But sometimes this is
hard to see because you are so involved with the self-image you
have created throughout your whole life. What is essential for
you to see is that, during those particularly painful distur-
bances, you have the opportunity to step back and actually see
the core of your self-image. In your daily experience, certain
energies develop—a trembling or volcanic sort of conscious-
ness, or a feeling of fear, anger or tightness. What is creating
this holding-strength is the self-image. But just like the self-
image, this holding-strength does not really exist. Just as there
is no abiding 'self,' or 'ego,' there is also no abiding self-image.
True, the actual feeling is there, but its holding-power will be
completely lost as soon as you have lost your interest in feeding
the self-image. At that time you can have a totally different
experience than what you had thought was possible in that
previous state of painfullness.

In order to make ourselves more flexible, we must first learn to
recognize this self-image. It is not you. All of this is a very big
subject, but here we are talking about the self-image in a
simple, practical way. For example, we are experiencing an
emotional disturbance. Maybe we have feelings of very deep
physical dissatisfaction. When you imagine or think about it, the thoughts and feelings are almost visible. Perhaps it is a sexual problem. Many people feel frustrated. They feel energy blockages. This may be due to a great deal of fantasizing which creates an image, an idea, which can never be experienced in reality. At the same time, a person may feel tremendous energy. But his energy is frustration-energy. He feels as if his energy is being drawn away—self-drowning, completely hopeless, a feeling of desperation. His emotions feel very thick, dense, dark and confused—there is no light. This energy of frustration causes the person to want to cry, but he does not know why. He hasn't any reasons or explanations for this unhappy state. Energy is drawn up, then collapses completely. The person feels drowned in his own sorrow. There is no life, no light, no positive feelings. At this time, he has many fantasies, dreams and expectations—but none of these things happen. Nothing comes alive. All that he experiences is the expression of what he would like to have happen. These kinds of feelings cause him to remain in his own realm, his own world. His self-image is keeping him there. But if he lets go of that energy, that holding-power, he can immediately separate himself from it; instantly he feels different. Something very different definitely happens, but a person may not exactly understand what it is unless he has this experience.

You can especially learn this awareness, or 'looking,' when you have obsessions or fantasies. You can see the restrictive self-image and separate yourself from it. Suppose you do not have any good friends and you feel very lonely. You want to be happy. You want to make your fantasy more vivid, more alive. You can almost see it, feel it, touch it. For instance, men, in their heads, do a lot of fantasizing about women's bodies, and the opposite is true for women. In this imagining, a person creates sensational feelings and generates much energy. You can feel that energy and vividly visualize it. Use this fresh energy to arouse your awareness to separate you from your self-image-making—and immediately look back at your situation. To recognize this energy before it consumes you, you must develop an awareness that can look back at the situation you have created. At this time the energy-strength felt very differently—it is like two different worlds, two different kinds of energies. But when you step back, then you can use this fresh energy to see the world of your involvement with the self-image.

What we created initially was the self-image—we are perpetuating something we can never satisfy. We will never find any satisfaction because we are not feeding the right
working with the self-image

taking a different perspective

person, which is our real self. Instead, this nourishment goes to our self-image. Often it is very difficult for us to determine whether certain sensations arise from us or from our self-image. Let us say our sensations create enjoyable feelings of importance or goodness or security. But the self-image has a very grasping nature. Holding on to the enjoyment and trying to make sensations permanent develops feelings of tightness. This self-grasping is always making demands and causing us, finally, to be dissatisfied with our present experience. We can never have enough. So how do we work with the self-image?

First, recognize the self-image, and second, jump away from it and look at it because this is not you.

We can find all sorts of rational excuses for our difficulties. But you must forget the rational side. You must understand that you are not happy because your feelings are very clouded. You feel uncertain, and a dark, heavy feeling dominates your whole being. You are not open because you are completely permeated by the self-image. We need to see this rigidity in ourselves and work to change our mental stance. For example, every time you think you are not happy, say, "I am happy." Say it strongly to yourself, even if your feelings are contradictory. Remember, it is your self-image and not you. Just as fast as a fish can move in the water, you can instantly change to a happy, balanced attitude. Keep yourself there. Believe yourself. Be open to that positiveness. Your whole inner situation can change, even if the external conditions do not change right away. If you want to feel positive and have satisfaction, then be open and flexible. You have the choice. When certain things are occurring in a way which you do not like, immediately, at that time, mentally change your concept. All you need to do is take a different perspective. When you do this, you will see the self-image creating disturbances. When you look back at the self-image, you don't want to see that your consciousness is dependent on so many conditions. So you need to understand that consciousness is really quite flexible.

Our consciousness does not have a diamond-like quality in its present form. It is not yet indestructible. So it is important to develop flexibility in our consciousness. We can practice changing from unhappiness: completely believe the unhappiness in your mind and feelings, and then change it ... like a fish which can quickly change direction in the water. Its body has almost an electric swiftness and sharpness. This energy is very subtle. So in the beginning try to develop this skill of changingness. This skill develops acceptance, not in the heavy way—"I need to accept this"—but in a simple way, just feeling the experience happening. In this way you give yourself the
choice to develop very effective or skillful changes whenever you are confronted with negative experiences. First, be the experience, completely accept it. Then jump to the positive side. How is it? You can clearly see the differences between the positive and negative experiences. Then you can almost experience both at the same time. Jump from one side to the other and then back again. Mentally jump. You will see there is no 'from: there is only awareness.

This experience is like looking into a mirror. From this awareness you can see where you are now and how it was before. You can almost simultaneously feel two different atmospheres. Then you can make the choice to develop the self-image which makes you a prisoner, or you can stay with the positive side which is a feeling of lightness, fullness and wholeness. No desiring, no unfulfillment. You yourself are balanced, and everything is interesting for you just as it is. You become no more and no less than what you are. You feel no impediments, no distractions, no obstacles. Your feelings and your mind no longer feel so divided. You do not feel agitated or restless. You do not feel you have to go somewhere, because you are feeding yourself directly, instantly. There is no dominating, conceptual self-image taking you away from the immediacy of your being. You feel complete just as you are. But when you are dominated by your self-image, you are not independent, you are not liberated. You feel pressured, under the control of some unidentifiable agent. You have chosen to allow yourself no choice. This is what the self-image perpetuates. As long as you are involved with your self-image, you have no real feeling of completeness. Once your consciousness is thinking in terms of the self-image, you are no longer free.

We must learn to deal with this self-image by first of all recognizing it for what it is and then acting differently. Our concepts and feelings create our consciousness, whether we are happy, sad, or indifferent. To change effectively we must accept certain ways or attitudes that may be different from ones we are familiar with. We need to learn to act differently. This is possible because there is nothing in us that is substantial. The 'actor' is not solid. Even so, we feel we do not want to change. We may be unwilling to see situations differently. This is the strength of our self-image. We don't seem to want to give up this bondage, this samsaric suffering, because we feel we have to maintain our position as servant to our self-image. We seem to love suffering. We almost have to be in some kind of suffering in order to live out our life. These are all characteristics of our self-image. Even if we consciously say to ourselves that we do not want to suffer and we do not want to go through...
the self-image does not exist. We still must go through these experiences. We must live them out. This is the difficult part.

Because the self-image does not really exist, it is very difficult to deal with. You cannot exactly catch it. But at the same time it dominates us and controls us and makes us miserable. We can say we don’t want to be miserable. But unless we come to some conclusions about what makes us suffer, we are only playing a game with ourselves. We cannot gain anything spiritually, or intellectually, unless we come to certain conclusions about the cause of our suffering. Otherwise we cannot become enlightened. We will not be able to achieve anything positive unless we choose for ourselves an attitude that is balanced, happy and satisfied. No matter what situation we find ourselves in, we have the choice of which way we would like to go. Mentally healthy, a balanced mind, feelings of satisfaction ... these are humanly very acceptable and desirable. If we can succeed in these things—which is like looking for knowledge or wisdom—our whole life will have purpose. Otherwise, we are just very casually playing in Samsara. If we want a healthy attitude, then we can decide.