



example. It appears to us to be a real cracker. There is something about it or in it that makes it a cracker and not anything else. It is one solid cracker, which exists “out there,” independent of causes and conditions, independent of parts, and independent of our minds and the concepts and labels we apply to it.

Q What does it mean to have the wisdom to realise reality? – I.F.

A: To be free from our difficulties in the cycle of constantly recurring problems, the Buddha said we must eradicate their root cause: the ignorance that grasps at a truly-existent, independently-existent self. This is done by gaining wisdom, realising emptiness, which is the third principal realisation of the path.

The emptiness perceived by this wisdom is the lack of all fantasised ways of existing that we’ve projected onto people and phenomena. What is it that people and phenomena are empty of? They lack being independently, truly or inherently-existent. Unfortunately, from beginningless time, we’ve been so accustomed to the seeming appearance of independently-existent phenomena and have been so used to grasping at this appearance as correct, that we fail to detect that it is false. We aren’t aware that people and phenomena do not exist in the way they appear to.

How do things appear to exist to us? Let’s take a cracker, as an

But, if the cracker really exists in this way, then when we analyse and search for this real cracker, we should definitely be able to find it.

If we break the cracker in half, is the real cracker in one half or in the other half? Or is it in both? If we say the cracker is in both, then we must have two crackers since we have two separate pieces. If we say the cracker is in one half rather than in the other, why is one piece the cracker while the other piece, which is made of the same material, isn’t?

Even if we do accept the bigger piece as being the cracker, then what about it or in it is the cracker? We should be able to find the cracker and the “crackerness” quality somewhere in it. But if we continue to break it into pieces in an attempt to find the real cracker, we’ll end up with a mess, not a cracker! We’ll have a pile of crumbs, and what about that is a cracker?

The real, independent cracker that appeared to exist is unfindable when we analyse and attempt to locate it.

If there were some inherent cracker there, we should have been able to find it either among its parts or separate from its parts. But, it isn’t its parts, and it isn’t anywhere else either. If the cracker were separate from its parts, then the toasted combination of flour and water could be on this plate and the cracker could be across the room. That’s hardly the case, for apart from the toasted dough, what else could be called “cracker”?

Nor is the cracker the collection of its parts, for a collection is just a group of parts. If none of the parts by itself is a cracker, how can many parts together be an independent cracker with some cracker-ness quality? Just as a collection of non-butterflies—for example grasshoppers—doesn’t make a butterfly, a group of non-crackers—that is, a group of crumbs—can’t suddenly make a real cracker that exists as a cracker on its own.

This leads us to conclude there was no inherent cracker to start with. In other words, the real, solid and findable cracker that appeared to us and that we grasped as existing independently, doesn’t exist. That’s not to say there’s no cracker there at all, only that the independent cracker doesn’t exist. That cracker doesn’t exist in the way it appeared to. It doesn’t exist in the way we thought it did.

However, the cracker still exists. If it didn’t, we couldn’t eat it! Although it doesn’t exist in an independent fashion, it does exist dependently. It depends on its causes and conditions: the flour, water, baker and so on. It depends on its parts: the various sections that compose it, as well as its colour and shape,

its smell, taste, and so on. And, it also depends on our conventionally conceiving of it and labelling it "cracker." As a society, we've agreed to consider this accumulation of parts that serves a particular function as a unique phenomenon, and give it the name "cracker" to distinguish it from other things.

How does the cracker exist? A group of atoms are put together in a certain pattern. Our minds look at that, conceive it to be one thing, and give it the name "cracker." It becomes a cracker because all of us have conceived of it in a similar way and have agreed, by the force of social convention, to give it the name "cracker."

If there is no essential, independent cracker, is there an independent me? Is there a real "I," a findable person?

Am I my body? If I am, then which part of my body is me? My arm? My stomach? My brain? All of my organs are composed of atoms. They aren't me. Nor is my entire body me, for if it were, then after I die, my corpse would be me. I am something more than the atoms that compose the body, for physical matter alone, without consciousness, can't perceive objects, and I am cognisant.

Then we examine, am I my mind? If so, then am I my eye consciousness which perceives colour and shape? My ear consciousness which perceives sound? My mental consciousness, the one that thinks? Am I a particular personality characteristic? If I were my anger, then I should always be angry. If I were my intelligence, then I should always be intelligent.

Nor am I a collection of all these various mental qualities and states of mind, because a collection of things each of which aren't a real, independent me can't become me.

The collection of my body and mind isn't an independent self, for it's a collection of parts. It's dependent on those parts. How could a real independent me be found in the collection of my body and mind—neither of which is me?

Nor do I exist as something separate from the body and mind. If I did, then I should be able to identify and find my self where there was neither my body nor my mind. That would mean that I could be in one place, while my body and mind were in another! That's clearly impossible. The self, or I, is linked and related to the body and mind.

Are we some independent entity that goes from one lifetime to the next? At the time of death, our minds absorb into more and more subtle states. The subtlest level of mind goes from one life to the next. However, this extremely subtle mind is constantly changing each moment. It never remains the same in two consecutive instants, just as on a physical level, the arrangement of electrons in an atom changes in each instant. We can't point to one moment of our mind which has been and always will be us. We aren't yesterday's mind, we aren't today's mind or tomorrow's mind. We aren't the mind that leaves this body at death, nor are we the mind that is reborn. What we call "I" is dependent upon all of these, but it isn't any one of them.

Remembering the example of a river can help us to understand

this. The Mississippi River isn't its banks. It's not the water or the rocks or the streams that feed into it. A real, independent river appears to exist when we aren't analysing, but as soon as we question, "What is this independent river that appears to exist?" we can't find anything to point to. Yet, there is a dependently-existing river.

Similarly, our mindstream isn't any particular moment of mind, nor is it the collection of moments. Such a truly-existent mindstream doesn't exist. Our mind is empty of true or inherent existence. Still, there is the continuum of moments of mind that form the mindstream, and this takes rebirth.

The "I" or the self doesn't exist independently of the body and mind. Nor can it be found within the body or mind. Nor is it the body and mind together. In other words, the solid, truly-existing "I" we felt when we were angry can't be found anywhere. Why not? Because it doesn't exist. The "I" is empty of being independently-existent. This is what is meant by selflessness or emptiness. It's important to understand that realising emptiness doesn't destroy the "I." An independent, solid, real "I" never existed. What we are destroying is the ignorance which holds on to the idea that such a solid "I" exists. ☺

- Ven Thubten Chodron
www.thubtenchodron.org
www.sravasti.org

