

TIBETAN BUDDHISM CENTER FOR WORLD PEACE
San Antonio, Texas

Shantideva’s *Bodhicharyavatara*, The Way of the Bodhisattva
Chapter 9: “Wisdom” Part 1: The Two Truths

The following is based on *The Nectar of Manjushri’s Speech: A Detailed Commentary on Shantideva’s Way of the Bodhisattva* by Khenpo Kunzang Pelden (Khenpo Kunpel); *Transcendent Wisdom, A Teaching on the Wisdom Section of Shantideva’s Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life* by His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, translated, edited and annotated by B. Alan Wallace; and teachings by Lama Tsongkhapa, His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, Geshe Drakpa Gelek, Geshe Lundup Sopa, Jeffrey Hopkins, Guy Newland, and Andy Wistreich.

TBCWP Session 10: Sunday, May 21, 2023

Geshe Nima requested we study Shantideva’s text following his two month teaching residency at the TBCWP between November 2022 and January 2023.

How to practice the perfection of wisdom

1. [1] “All these branches of the Doctrine The Enlightened Sage expounded for the sake of wisdom. Therefore they must cultivate this wisdom Who wish to have an end of suffering.” For those of us who are following the Mahayana path, the Buddha taught “all these branches of the Doctrine for the sake of wisdom”—in other words, the skillful methods that Shantideva has explained in his previous eight chapters, such as the development of bodhicitta, and the first five perfections of generosity, ethical discipline, patience, heroic perseverance (enthusiastic effort) and meditative concentration, were all taught by the Buddha so we would be able to complete our training in the perfection of wisdom realizing emptiness. This wisdom (Skt. *prajna*, Tib. *sherab*) is the direct cause of omniscience; it enables us to remove the subtle seeds and imprints on our mindstreams that obscure our realizations of liberation from cyclic existence and omniscience, and makes it possible for us to finally actualize ultimate, pure, primordial wisdom (Skt. *jnana*, Tib. *yeshe*)—the omniscient wisdom of enlightenment.

2. Even if we only wanted to eradicate our own suffering and achieve liberation from cyclic existence for ourselves we’d need to cultivate the wisdom that realizes emptiness directly. There is no other way to completely uproot our own and others’ suffering. The root of all suffering is our grasping at the independent self-existence of persons and phenomena, together with the beginningless habitual imprints on our mindstreams of such a mistaken view. To sever this root it’s necessary that the wisdom realizing emptiness guides and takes hold of our bodhicitta and our practice of the paramitas—the perfections. Without wisdom, the first five perfections of generosity, ethical discipline, heroic perseverance (enthusiastic effort), and meditative concentration are powerless to reach enlightenment. The perfection of wisdom is of great importance—it is the main and indispensable aspect of the path to enlightenment, so we should put great and enthusiastic effort into its development.

3. So how do we go about doing this? First, we must understand what is known in Buddhism as the “two truths”. We have to realize that the two truths—relative truth and ultimate truth—are not contradictory, but mutually support each other. We need to be able to establish an object’s

relative nature without disproving its ultimate nature, and vice versa. When we see these two natures as being noncontradictory then we will understand the union of the two truths. The two truths always go hand in hand. To come to this understanding we have to develop both the method aspect of the path in order to comprehend relative truth, as well as the wisdom aspect of the path that comprehends ultimate truth.

4. Just as a bird needs two wings to fly, we need to develop both practices of method and wisdom. If we want to attain the correct view we must cultivate an understanding that realizes the two truths in such a way that they are never separated. Therefore in his ninth chapter Shantideva extensively describes these two truths, which when understood correctly, are like two wings which move us forward to enlightenment.

The two truths

1. [2] *“Relative and ultimate, These the two truths are declared to be. The ultimate is not within the reach of intellect, For intellect is said to be the relative.”*

Distinguishing the two truths

1. The two truths are explained as relative (conventional) truth and ultimate truth. All phenomena have two modes or conditions of being. There is the “appearing mode,” which is the mere appearance of everything, in all its multifaceted diversity. This is the relative truth. Then there is the “abiding mode,” which is the abiding, unceasing, continual nature of everything as it really is—which is, being completely empty of any kind of independent self-existence. This is the ultimate truth. These two modes of phenomena—“appearing” and “abiding”—are, on their respective levels, indisputable, which is why they are regarded as two *truths*. The two truths should be understood as being neither distinct from, nor identical with one another, but arising and occurring together at the same time.

2. All phenomena other than emptiness are relative truths and all emptinesses are ultimate truths. For example, the mere appearance of a person and their aggregates of body and mind is the relative truth of that person, while the emptiness or the lack of independent self-existence of a person and their aggregates is the ultimate truth of that person. So these two truths are not two essentially distinct entities. They are not cut off and separated from each other. As the Heart Sutra says, *“Form is emptiness; emptiness is form. Emptiness is none other than form; form is none other than emptiness.”* The union of appearance and emptiness is beyond the expression of thoughts and words—it must be experienced non-conceptually and directly. As long as the two truths are considered to be essentially distinct entities, the perfect view of wisdom will not be realized. It is important for us to be very clear about this.

Definition of the two truths

1. Shantideva’s statement in the second stanza of the ninth chapter which says, *“The ultimate is not within the reach of intellect, For intellect is said to be the relative,”* requires our careful examination. Some might get the impression that Shantideva is saying ultimate truth cannot be experienced by the mind, and is therefore unknowable. Others may conclude from this that ultimate truth is neither existent nor nonexistent. But Tsongkhapa, in his texts that analyze the highest Madhyamaka (Middle Way) philosophy of the Prasangikas, points out the flaws in these kinds of conclusions and presents a view of ultimate truth that agrees with the meaning put forth by Shantideva.

2. The word “intellect” that Shantideva uses in this stanza, refers to a being’s capacity for rational and intelligent thought. It is helpful to remember that “intellect” does not have the same meaning as the word “mind”. In Buddhism, “mind” is synonymous with “consciousness”—that which is clear, aware, and cognizes, according to the Buddhist definition. What Shantideva is saying in this stanza is that a direct experience of ultimate truth is beyond the reach of intellectual, rational concepts. He is not saying that ultimate truth is beyond the reach of consciousness that directly realizes it—which is something that is inexpressible through words or conceptual thought.

3. According to the highest Madhyamika Prasangika philosophy, ultimate truth always refers to emptiness. When emptiness is directly realized by consciousness imbued with wisdom, nothing appears to that consciousness except a *mere absence of independent self-existence*. Emptiness merely negates independent self-existence. So, the wisdom consciousness of a person having a direct realization of emptiness has no thought, “I am realizing emptiness,” and has no thought, “This is emptiness,” or even the thought, “I am experiencing this.” In other words, there is no sense of separation between subject and object. It is a completely non-dualistic, unified, blissful arising of consciousness *directly* realizing emptiness.

4. His Holiness the Dalai Lama says that after we’ve had such a direct realization of emptiness, even though phenomena appear to exist independently from their own side, we understand that ultimately they don’t exist that way. There is a sense they are like a magician’s illusions in that there is a combination of their appearing to us one way but actually existing another way. Though they may appear to our senses to exist independently from their own side, we understand that they are empty of any kind of independent self-existence. This is the correct way to practice thinking about relative truth for those of us on the Bodhisattva path who have not yet attained a direct realization of emptiness.

5. Our misconceptions that superimpose a sense of goodness and badness onto phenomena beyond what is actually there and which serve as the basis for our generating afflictive emotions related to attachment and aversion, will decrease when we understand this. Our afflictive emotions are based on the *misconception* that phenomena actually exist the way they appear: as independently self-existent entities that are separate from us and which exist the way we conceive them to be. That misconception causes us to have an incorrect view of appearing phenomena which is at odds with the correct view of relative truth.

6. Once we understand this, the two truths can be posited in the following way: an ultimate truth is that which is understood by a direct, valid cognition in which all dualistic appearances have fallen away, and a relative truth is that which is understood by a direct, valid cognition in which dualistic appearances have not fallen away. What is meant by dualistic appearance here is the appearance of an object combined with the appearance of it being independently self-existent.

7. “Independent self-existence” has a very specific meaning in Mahayana Buddhism. It refers to an object’s or entity’s supposed existence *from its own side*. However, such a mode of existence is utterly non-existent; it is a misconception. It is only conceived by a mind that

mistakenly grasps at what is known as “true existence”. According to Shantideva and the Prasangika Madhyamika school of tenets which he represents, all of the following terms refer to this falsely conceived mode of existence and all of them are to be understood as synonyms: “independent self-existence”, “inherent existence”, “true existence” or “truly existent”, and “existence from its own side”. We can easily be confused in our study of emptiness if we don’t understand that these terms are referring to the falsely conceived mode of existence that is the object of negation.

8. It is this mistaken way we perceive things—that phenomena actually have an independent self-existence that is *not* merely being superimposed or projected onto them by our conceptual consciousness—that is the very object that is negated and proven to be false when we have a direct realization of emptiness. Whenever any of these synonymous terms are used in Buddhism they refer to the mistaken idea of the way things actually exist—the mistaken view that is responsible for all the suffering in the world. So Shantideva’s purpose going forward in this chapter is to refute any person or school (Buddhist or non-Buddhist) holding on to such a mistaken and incorrect view.

Two kinds of people within the world

1. [3] *“In light of this, within the world, two kinds of people are observed: Those with yogic insight and the common run of people. In this regard, the views of ordinary folk are undermined by yogis who themselves are in the world.”* With regard to the understanding of the two truths, Shantideva says that within the world of cyclic existence there are two types or groups of people he has observed. There are those such as Buddhist yogis engaged in the philosophical investigation of the two truths who have not yet had a direct realization of emptiness or completed all the stages and levels of the path, but possess varying levels of insight and meditative absorption—they are referred to by Shantideva as “worldly yogis”; and then there are ordinary worldly people who are without these qualities.

2. Within the category of ordinary people, there are those who have no interest or engagement in philosophical investigation, and those who do. Those who are don’t, believe without question that their “I” is an unchanging reality. They regard their body as a single, unitary whole thing, and their mind as a permanent thing. Those ordinary people who do have an interest in philosophical investigation have put forth numerous non-Buddhist doctrines, all of which can be brought under the two general headings of eternalism and nihilism. An example of eternalism would be the assertion of an eternal self or soul, along with something that serves as the original cause of existence. An example of nihilism would be the denial of past and future lives and the karmic law of cause and effect.

3. All theories such as these are successively refuted by the yogis of the Buddhist tradition, who teach that bodies are aggregations of parts and not whole and single entities, and that the mind exists in an impermanent process of constant change. The arguments that refute the theories of eternalism and nihilism will be explained later in the text.

Compiled and edited by Tenzin Sherab/Christopher Moroney