

TIBETAN BUDDHISM CENTER FOR WORLD PEACE
San Antonio, Texas

Shāntideva's *Bodhicharyāvatāra*, The Way of the Bodhisattva
Chapter 9: "Wisdom" Part 3: Buddhist Tenets

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 Shāntideva'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, Andy Wistreich, and the guidance of Geshe Lobsang Nima.

TBCWP Session 12: Sunday, June 11, 2023

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

The Buddhist schools of tenets

1. We briefly touched on the Buddhist schools of tenets at the end of session 11, so we'll start with a review of the first school and move on from there. It's important that we have an overview and understanding of the Buddhist schools of tenets and how they each posit their view of the two truths, relative and ultimate, because they represent the evolution of philosophical thought that leads to the correct view of the self and reality.

2. Buddhist yogis who assert the two truths—relative (or conventional) and ultimate—and have not yet had a direct realization of emptiness (what Shantideva calls "worldly" yogis) are of two types. The first type are yogis who recognize all phenomena as being empty of inherent existence. Those are the yogis who hold the views of the supreme Prasangika Madhyamika school of tenets. The second type are the yogis who share the common view that phenomena *do* have inherent existence. These are yogis who ascribe to the views of the schools of tenets known as Svatantrika Madhyamika, Chittamatra, Sautrantika and Vaibhashika. The views of those yogis, who assert that all things have inherent existence, are refuted by the logical reasonings presented by the yogis who hold the Prasangika Madhyamika viewpoint, such as Shantideva and Nāgārjuna.

2. Shantideva mentions the different levels of understanding of yogis to point out that the Prasangika system that he represents is superior to any of the other philosophical schools and cannot be contradicted by them. There are two Theravada systems of tenets, Vaibashika and Sautrantika, and two Mahayana systems, Chittamatra and Madhyamaka. These systems present emptiness in different ways, but the final view of the Buddha is the view presented by the Prasangika school, which is a division of the Madhyamaka school. According to this view, emptiness is the mere absence of inherent existence, and the emptiness of any phenomenon, person or otherwise, is that phenomenon's utter lack of inherent existence. 'Inherent existence' is therefore the object of negation of emptiness. This means that in order to realize emptiness it is necessary to negate inherent existence. Through understanding there is no inherent existence, we will gradually come to understand emptiness.

‘Inherent existence’: the Prasangika object of negation

1. We have to develop a very clear understanding of what ‘inherent existence’—the object of negation or refutation—means, because until we do we won’t be able to refute or negate it. We are so habituated to our ordinary way of perceiving and conceiving things it’s extremely difficult for us to understand the Prasangika view right away. We have to train our minds gradually so that we surely and steadily arrive at the ultimate correct view. This is the purpose of studying the four systems of Buddhist tenets.

2. One of the ways in which we can examine the idea of inherent existence is by observing our sense of self, or the ‘I’. In dependence upon our aggregates of body and mind all of us grasp at a self. However, not every way in which we apprehend the ‘I’ results in self-grasping. When we apprehend the ‘I’ or the self, two distinct aspects of the mind are functioning. One aspect of the mind, which is logical and correct, apprehends the conventionally existent merely labeled ‘I’ and the other aspect of the mind, which is illogical and incorrect, apprehends the ‘I’ as inherently existent. This second aspect is the mind of self-grasping.

3. At present these two modes of existence of the self, one true and the other false, appear as if they’re mixed together and it is extremely difficult for us to tell them apart. At certain times, though, the incorrectly conceived self does appear very distinctly to us. For example, when we are being harshly criticized for our behavior, we’re not clinging to the idea that our behavior is the thing being criticized, we’re clinging to the idea that *I am being criticized*. Or when we are in danger of falling from a high cliff, we don’t cling to the idea that our body will fall or our mind will fall, we cling to the idea that *I will fall*. Or when we’re trapped underwater and aren’t able to get to the surface for air, we don’t cling to the idea that our body may be drowning, we cling to the idea that *I may be drowning*.

4. At times like these a vividly appearing ‘I’ which seems to be independent of the body and mind arises. If this ‘I’ actually existed it would be an inherently existing ‘I’—in other words, an independently self-existing ‘I’. However, when such an ‘I’ vividly arises in our consciousness and we take it into our mind to form an intensely strong conception of it, we are being completely mistaken and wrong—the object that we’re grasping at is entirely non-existent. This mistaken conception—this wrong consciousness—is an example of self-grasping, and the ‘I’ that it holds onto so strongly and with such intensity is an object of negation of emptiness. It’s hard for us to even hear this properly because we’re so habituated to such a wrong view. Similarly, the vivid appearance of all other phenomena as being inherently existent—the inherently existent body that ‘I’ call ‘mine’, the inherently existent chair, the inherently existent person sitting next to me, the inherently existent vase of flowers on the inherently existent table, and on and on—should all be understood as objects to be negated in the comprehension of emptiness.

5. This might make us wonder whether the ‘I’ or self exists at all. According to the Buddha, it does exist, but in a way that can only be discerned as being distinct and separate from the *false* sense of ‘I’ by a very sharp and penetrating intellect. Also, we might think that the false conception of ‘I’ only occurs at extreme moments, like when we are about to drown or fall from a cliff. But this isn’t the case. For us at present there is not a single moment in which this grasping at an inherently existent ‘I’ does not arise

‘Self-supporting substantial existence’: the lower schools’ object of negation

1. According to the Prasangika Madhyamika view, the object of negation of emptiness is the inherent existence of phenomena, whether it’s referring to the self or any other phenomena. The lower Buddhist schools present a different object of negation. The lower schools differ on a number of things, but they all agree that it is possible to achieve liberation from cyclic existence through realizing what they call the subtle selflessness of persons, which is the person’s emptiness of being self-supporting and substantially existent.

2. To understand what this means, we have to understand the object that is being negated, which is a self-supporting, substantially existent person. This would be a person that could appear to our mind without depending upon the appearance of any of the person’s aggregates of body and mind. The fact is, we never perceive a person or sentient being without at least part of that person’s or being’s aggregates appearing to us. When we think of any person or sentient being, either their face, or their body, or the sound of their voice, or the way they think, or even their touch and the way they smell appears to our mind. Their self or ‘I’ can’t appear to us without depending upon the appearance of their aggregates of body or mind. This indicates that the self or ‘I’ of the person or sentient being is empty of being self-supporting and substantially existent.

3. Although the ‘I’ is dependent upon the aggregates, through the force of habitual self-grasping we hold the *opposite* view. It actually seems to us that our aggregates depend upon the ‘I’. We habitually think of our aggregates of body and mind as our possessions and feel that the ‘I’ owns and controls them. We talk about *my* body, *my* thoughts, *my* feelings, *my* consciousness, and even things like *my* karma. And in this way we grasp at an ‘I’ that is independent of the aggregates and can appear to the mind without depending on the appearance of the aggregates. If such an ‘I’—meaning, such a person—did exist, it would be a self-supporting, substantially existent ‘I’ or person. For the lower schools, such a person is the object of negation of the subtle selflessness of persons. In other words, for the lower schools, what they call the ‘subtle selflessness of persons’ is the person’s emptiness of being self-supporting and substantially existent.

4. For the Prasangikas, what they call the *gross* selflessness of persons is the person’s emptiness of being self-supporting and substantially existent, and what they call the *subtle* selflessness of persons is the person’s emptiness of being inherently existent. According to the Prasangikas, there is no inherently existent person to be found even among the aggregates. To them, a mind that conceives a person to be inherently existent is a mind that holds on to the subtle self-grasping of persons. Although the lower schools negate the existence of a self-supporting, substantially existent person, they all in their own way accept the existence of an inherently existent person. All the lower schools accept that there is an inherently existent person that can be found *among* the person’s aggregates. The various lower schools differ in how they identify this existent person.

Vaibhashika (“Great Exposition”) school

1. Followers of the Vaibhashika school accept the existence of external objects but reject the idea that consciousness can know itself. The way the Vaibhashikas posit the two truths is as follows. Something is a relative truth if it can be physically destroyed or mentally dissected, so

that there is nothing left of that object for the mind to recognize. This means that phenomena that are made up of parts, such as a rock that can be crushed and destroyed into bits and pieces, or consciousness that can be dissected by mental analysis into smaller and smaller moments of itself, have a relative existence. By contrast, something is an ultimate truth if it cannot be physically destroyed or mentally dissected, so that there is something left of that object for the mind to recognize. This means that the smallest partless particle of material form and the shortest indivisible moment of consciousness—neither of which can be destroyed or split according to the Vaibhashikas—are said to have ultimate existence. These ideas are held in common by both the Vaibhashikas and the Sautrantikas. The Vaibhashikas say that the self is the mere collection of the five aggregates that make up the person—when the aggregates of body and mind appear to you, you see the person.

Sautrantika (“Sutra”) school

1. The Sautrantikas assert the existence of external objects and they accept the idea that consciousness can know itself. One of their distinctive tenets is that external objects, although they exist, are only known by means of the mental aspects that those external objects cast upon the mind (like reflections in a mirror). It is only these aspects, which are themselves mental in nature, that the mind cognizes directly. Although a causal relationship exists between them, the external, non-mental object is said to be “concealed” by the mental aspect, which necessarily comes between it and the cognizing mind. Another distinctive tenet of the Sautrantikas is that non-associated factors, meaning factors which they say aren’t associated with either consciousness or form—such as impermanence and continuity—are merely names. Another tenet is that nirvana is a non-thing, without real existence. Among the two sub-schools of the Sautrantika system—those who follow scriptural authority and those who follow reason—those who follow scripture have a view of the self similar to the Vaibhashikas’, whereas those who follow reason say that the self is the main mind or primary mind, which refers to the mental consciousness alone.

2. Within the context of the two truths, the Sautrantikas make a further distinction and say that all phenomena having specific characteristics that are functional, or able to produce an effect, are defined as ultimate; and all phenomena having general characteristics that are non-functional, or unable to produce an effect, are defined as relative. For the Sautrantikas, the terms “specifically characterized”, “thing”, “impermanent”, “functional” or “causally effective”, and “ultimate” are all synonyms for ultimate truth. By contrast, the terms, “generally characterized”, “non-thing”, “permanent”, “non-functional” or “causally ineffective”, and “relative” are all synonyms connected with relative truth. Some of these expressions, which seem to be in agreement with Vaibhashika terminology, in fact undermine the Vaibhashika tenets. Both schools agree, however, that the indivisible particles of matter and indivisible instants of consciousness are the ultimate truth; and in this they are refuted by the Chittamatrins, who constitute the third school of tenets.

Chittamatra (“Mind Only”) school

1. The Chittamatrins reject the existence of external objects but affirm the ultimate reality of self-cognizing consciousness. They disprove the theory of the Vaibhashikas and Sautrantikas concerning the ultimate existence of the infinitesimal partless particle with arguments such as those of Vasubandu, the 5th century Indian Buddhist monk and scholar. Vasubandu argues that

if one particle is in direct contact with six other particles: one on top of it, one below it, and one in each of the four directions surrounding it, the question is: Does the central particle have parts or not? If it has parts, the particle is divided into six and cannot be partless. If it has no parts, then however many particles are assembled, they could never connect to other parts to produce extended objects, and phenomena couldn't exist. The result would only ever be a single partless particle, and even gross aggregations like mountains would be reduced to a single partless particle, which is absurd.

2. The Cittamatrins also disprove the lower schools' theory that there is an ultimately existing indivisible moment of consciousness through similar arguments. Again, if the instants of consciousness don't have parts—some which meet and some which don't—then all instants become identical, and one ends up with the faulty conclusion that consciousness is incapable of change and cannot be divided into earlier and later moments.

3. Because they refute the ultimate reality of a partless material particle and an indivisible instant of consciousness, the Chittamatrins say that whatever seems to be “out there” existing as an absolutely real external object is, in fact, appearing only in the mind and actually exists nowhere else. All phenomena are therefore said to be of the mind, like an elephant one sees in a dream. As for the mind itself, only self-knowing, self-illuminating consciousness, devoid of the duality of subject and object, is posited as ultimate.

4. The Chittamatra school posits the two truths in the following way. All phenomena can be accounted for within three natures: imputed, other-powered, and thoroughly established. The first nature, “imputed”, refers to phenomena which do not ultimately exist, but are imputed by terms and conceptual thought. Some of these phenomena are considered to be relative truth and some are considered to be non-existent imputations. The second nature, “other-powered”, refers to all impermanent phenomena which arise in dependence upon the power of causes and conditions, and which do not sustain themselves from moment to moment. They are relative truths. The third nature, “thoroughly established”, refers to the selflessness of persons and the selflessness of phenomena, both of which are ultimate truths. These three natures are all far too complicated to go into here, but as a consequence of seeing these natures as only existing in the mind, the Chittamatrins say the aggregates of form, feeling, discrimination and compositional factors are not the existent ‘I’, and also the deluded mind is not the ‘I’. They attribute true existence to the self-cognizing mind, an entity which they term “mind-basis-of-all”. They say the mind-basis-of-all is the self that is found to exist when it is sought, because it is the entity that transmigrates from one lifetime to the next. They say the *person* is imputed to the mental and physical aggregates, but the mind-basis-of-all is the actual self. This position is refuted by the arguments of the Madhyamikas.

Madhyamaka (“Middle Way”) school

1. Madhyamaka is the fourth school of tenets and attributes ultimate reality neither to external objects nor to the self-cognizing mind. The Madhyamikas say that all knowable phenomena are, in their very nature, beyond conceptual constructs; they are the union of the two truths; they are equal. For this reason, Madhyamaka is supreme and enormously superior to other tenet systems. According to the levels of mental sharpness with which the two truths are investigated, the Madhyamikas are divided into two subgroups: the Svatantrika Madhyamikas (Middle Way

Autonomy system) and the Prasangika Madhyamikas (Middle Way Consequentialist system). The Svatantrikas refute all the preceding viewpoints of the lower schools and say that the self is a non-inherently existent continuum of the most subtle mind that goes from life to life. The Prasangikas say that the self is a mere conceptual label.

2. Madhyamaka has two methods of positing the two truths. The first way is in terms of their ultimate level, or how phenomena actually exist. According to this method, the way phenomena appear—independently self-existing—is their relative truth; the way they actually are—empty of inherent or independent self-existence—is their ultimate truth. The second way is in terms of their relative level, or how phenomena appear. According to this method, when subject and object appear in such a way that there is a discrepancy between the way they appear and the way they really are—in other words, their dualistic appearance has not fallen away—this is the relative truth. In contrast, when both subject and object appear in accordance to the way they actually are—in other words, their dualistic appearance *has* fallen away—this is the ultimate truth.

The faults of the lower tenets

1. The faults of the lower tenet systems can be summarized as follows. The two Theravada schools, Vaibhashika and Sautrantika, have two main defects. On the relative level, they are concerned only with the selflessness of persons and the non-existence of a substantially existent, self-sufficient person without acknowledging the selflessness of all phenomena, and on the ultimate level, they attribute absolute reality to the partless material particle and the indivisible instant of consciousness. The Chittamatra school asserts that the self-knowing, self-illuminating mind-basis-of-all is the ultimate truth. And finally, the Svatantrika Madhyamikas insist on separating the two truths so that phenomena exist as being fifty percent relative and fifty percent ultimate, rather than seeing all phenomena as a union of the two truths. Although at present it is hard for those of us who have not studied about emptiness to distinguish between the non-existent ‘I’ and the existent ‘I’, once emptiness is understood these two will be seen to be very distinct from one another.

How the objections of ordinary people are refuted

1. [3] “...the views of ordinary folk are undermined by yogis who themselves are in the world [4] (within whose ranks the lower, in degrees of insight, are confuted [proven wrong] by the higher) by means of the examples that the yogis and the worldly both accept. And for the sake of the result, analysis is left aside.” As yogis’ insights into the nature of things becomes more discerning, those with valid cognition are able to refute inferior theories and not vice versa. In the same way, as realizations increase and qualities are acquired on the five paths and ten grounds (*bhumis*), lower realizations and qualities are superseded.

2. But how are Buddhist yogis able to disprove the point of view of ordinary people? One could argue that since ordinary people perceive origination (non-dependent arising) and independent self-existence as realities and are convinced of this, there is no common ground on which they could be persuaded to change their view. One side says that all things lack true or inherent existence and the other side says all things have it. But there is an example of something that both sides accept as illusory and not real. This is the example of mirages or dreams, which, though they appear to us, don’t truly exist in the way they seem. In the same way, all things—material form and so on—appear without truly, inherently existing. In contrast, there is no

commonly held example that can be used to show that something can appear and at the same time can have independent self-existence. For this reason worldly people can never prove to Buddhist practitioners that phenomena have truly independent self-existence.

Why train in the path if the path itself is illusory?

3. Given this, we could say, “What’s the point of training on the Bodhisattva path if the path itself is not truly existent and illusory like a mirage?” The answer is that for the sake of achieving the goal of freeing all beings from suffering, we must follow the path without subjecting it to that kind of reasoning. The attainment of the goal is necessary for the simple reason that the illusory appearances of samsara and nirvana cannot be prevented and are inescapable until the dualistic fixation on subject and object disappears through a direct realization of emptiness. Otherwise these same illusory appearances will continue without interruption to affect living beings, helping them or harming them as the case may be.

4. The Bodhisattva path is a means of generating the love, compassion, and wisdom that works to dispel the suffering of ourselves and others, leading all beings to freedom and happiness. This is why we must persevere on the path and never give up—not because we believe in its real existence or the inherent, independently self-existing reality of its result. Khenpo Kunpel, in his commentary to this chapter, says of the path that it’s like emanating an illusory army in order to deliver beings from their illusory enemies or like stepping into someone’s dream who is suffering from the frightening nightmares of their sleep in order to gently awaken them.

5. To be on the Bodhisattva path is to recognize the value and potential of all sentient beings, whether they appear to be friends, enemies, or strangers, regardless of their status, species, race, gender, size, or shape. Whoever or whatever they may seem to be, and whatever actions they engage in or however they may behave, behind the deceptive veil of appearances they are all exactly like us in wanting to be happy and not wanting to suffer, and many of them have become overwhelmed by their mental and emotional afflictions and ignorance. But because each and every one of them has this amazing thing called consciousness, each and every one has within their being Buddha nature—the potential for attaining the unified state of complete enlightenment. The recently departed Lama Zopa Rinpoche, who was a great Bodhisattva of our time, said, “An ant’s life may be of little consequence to us, but to the ant it is everything.” We should always be mindful of the value of every conscious being’s life and take to heart Lama Zopa’s words, because his words can inspire us to courageously develop our awakening heart and mind of bodhicitta and enthusiastically practice the way of the Bodhisattva until we ourselves attain enlightenment for the benefit of all living beings.

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