

TIBETAN BUDDHISM CENTER FOR WORLD PEACE
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Shāntideva's *Bodhicharyāvatāra*, The Way of the Bodhisattva
Chapter 9: "Wisdom" Part 4: Illusion vs Reality

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.

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

The illusory nature of inherent existence vs the reality of emptiness

1. [5] "*When ordinary folk perceive phenomena, they look on them as real, and not illusory. This, then, is the subject of debate where ordinary and yogis differ.*" For the purposes of this discussion we can broadly say there are two types of individuals—ordinary people who don't engage in philosophical investigation, and contemplatives, or yogis, who do. Furthermore, among the contemplative yogis there are those who engage in higher levels of investigation and those who engage in lower ones. Those contemplative yogis who assert that all phenomena are empty of any inherently existing identity are on a higher level; and those who deny it are on a lower level.

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 of Buddhist tenets and cannot be contradicted by them. The proponents of the two Theravada schools, Vaibashika and Sautrantika, can be labeled Realists, because their philosophies assert that phenomena exist inherently and independently, even in the absence of a consciousness perceiving them. Of the two Mahayana schools, Chittamatra and Madhyamaka, the Chittamatrins can be labeled Idealists, because their philosophy asserts that reality is equivalent to mind or consciousness; that reality is entirely a mental construct of ideas. The Madhyamikas can be labeled as philosophical Centrists, because their school defends a central or "Middle Way" position that refers to the insight into emptiness that transcends the extremes of existence and non-existence, or eternalism and nihilism.

3. In the following dialectic, Shantideva uses reason to argue with the lower schools that the final view of the Buddha is the view presented by the Prasangika division of the Madhyamaka "Middle Way" school. According to the Prasangika 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. Shantideva argues that when the Realists—the proponents of inherently existing things—perceive phenomena they don't recognize their

illusion-like character. Instead they assert their inherent existence. This is where the Madhyamika-Prasangikas disagree with them.

How things appear vs how they exist

1. [6] *“Forms and so forth, which we all perceive, Exist by general acclaim but not by valid reasoning. They’re false just like, for instance, unclean things regarded in the common view as pure.”* Here Shantideva is saying that forms and the other objects of our senses that we all perceive directly—sounds, tastes, and so on—are just mere appearances to the mind that are established conventionally by consensus. They exist falsely because the way they appear to us doesn’t correspond to the way they exist. For instance, something that in reality is impure, like a human body, is commonly accepted as being pure.

2. An “unclean” or “impure” object that is commonly referred to in Buddhism is the human body. Sexual attraction toward the human body necessarily involves viewing it as something “pure” and desirable, and this is enhanced by the use of apparel, scented liquids, ornamental pieces, cosmetics, and how the hair is cut and arranged. The craving, desirous mind focuses on the exterior appearance of the body that it’s attracted to and strongly associates that appearance with desirable qualities. When the mind is free of sensual craving it can readily see the “impurities” of the body; the outer skin is a container for blood, fat, bone, thick sticky mucus, smelly sweat, excrement and urine. The lustful mind ignores the presence of these impure elements and falsely regards the body as being “pure”. We have a tendency to hold an idealized view of the human body, when in fact, from it’s birth the body is constantly going through a process of aging, sickness, and death. And on a daily basis, the impurity of the body is self-evident—as Ven. Robina Courtin says, “we’re all walking sewers!”

3. In a similar way all phenomena are completely devoid of any kind of inherent existence although they appear to the minds of worldly beings as having inherent existence. The manner in which things appear and the manner in which they exist are not in alignment. Beings whose minds are affected by the delusional grasping at inherent existence perceive and apprehend inherently existent things when, in fact, no such things exist. In this way phenomena are said to be misleading and deceptive. Their manner of appearance and existence do not correspond to one another. This explains why, no matter how much we crave and grasp at things, ultimately we’re never satisfied by them and continually need and want something more, or something better, or something different.

Worldly views vs Yogis’ views

1. [7] *“But that he might instruct the worldly, Our Protector spoke of “things”. But these in truth lack even momentariness. Now if you say it’s wrong to claim the momentary as relative, [8] there is no fault. For momentariness is relative for yogis, but for worldly beings, ultimate. Were it otherwise, the common view could fault the yogic insight into corporal impurity.”*

2. This stanza explains the Prasangika view of how the Buddha taught that conventionally appearing things are impermanent—that is, in a state of momentary change—in order to lead people gradually to a realization that conventionally existing things lack any kind of inherent, independent self-existence. Thus, a realization of impermanence will gradually lead to a realization of emptiness. The Realist proponents of the lower schools argue with the Prasangikas

that it is incorrect then to make the claim that things exist even conventionally since they're constantly changing. But the Prasangikas respond by saying there is no fault. To the untrained minds of worldly beings, the phenomena around us appear to be fairly fixed and change relatively slowly; only the gross impermanence of things can be observed by us, such as the smashing of glass into bits and pieces. But the awareness of a yogi who contemplates how things exist conventionally is refined to such a point that the very subtle, moment-by-moment arising and passing of phenomena can be seen and ascertained. This momentary subtle impermanence is an important aspect of conventional reality.

3. In relation to ordinary people, who conceive things in conventional reality to be largely permanent and unchanging, a yogi's insight into the momentary impermanence of things represents the way things actually exist within conventional reality. Otherwise, if the contemplative yogi's views could be repudiated simply by the general consensus of worldly people, then the conclusion that the human body is impure would be invalidated, since ordinary people think of it as pure and attractive. Therefore, the Prasangikas state very plainly that truth is not established by "majority rule". The insights of the enlightened few may invalidate the consensus of the masses.

Illusion-like vs illusion

1. [9] *"Through a Buddha, who is but illusion, how does merit spring?" As if the Buddha were existing truly. "But," you ask, "if beings are like illusions, How, when dying, can they take rebirth?"*

2. Here, the lower school Realists are saying to the Prasangikas that if all phenomena have no true or inherent existence, then the Buddha too must have no true or inherent existence. If this is the case, how can merits be accrued from making offerings to a Buddha who is like an illusion? The Prasangikas respond that in the same way the Realists receive merits which they consider to be truly existent from paying respect to a Buddha whom they consider to be truly existent, so do the Prasangikas receive merits they consider to be like an illusion from paying respect to a Buddha whom they consider to be like an illusion. The Prasangikas acknowledge the accumulation of merit and the effects of actions—but not as truly, or inherently, existent.

3. The Realists then come back with the question: if sentient beings are like illusions, how can they take birth again when they die? —for when a magician conjures an illusion of a person, as soon as that illusion ceases that person never comes into existence again. This is somewhat analogous to the spectacular illusory effects of current state-of-the-art drone "holographic" light shows. When the devices that produce them are shut down, the holographic illusion disappears.

4. The Prasangikas respond by saying sentient beings are not the same as illusions in all respects. They are only compared to illusions in order to illustrate the fact that they lack inherent existence in the same way illusions do. When we see a magician's illusion of a person, or a fantastic drone dragon hologram flying among the buildings of a city skyline, we aren't seeing a person or dragon that truly exists from its own side; we're the ones who conceive those illusions to be real in their appearance. Similarly, sentient beings are not inherently existent from their own side, but we conceive them to be by imputing or attributing inherent, independent self-existence onto them. In this way only are sentient beings similar to illusions.

5. [10] *“As long as the conditions are assembled, illusions, likewise, will persist and manifest. Why, through simply being more protracted, should sentient beings be regarded as more real?”* As long as the various causes and conditions are present and persist, even an illusion, like a holographic dragon and a magician’s illusory person, will function. In the same way, as long as sentient beings have the necessary causes and conditions for taking rebirth in cyclic existence, those beings will continue to take rebirth. So the appearance of both illusions and sentient beings are dependent upon particular sets of causes and conditions.

6. The Realists respond by saying there is a great difference between a magician’s illusion of a person and an actual sentient being. The magician’s person is manifested and then remains for a very short time, whereas sentient beings have been in existence since beginningless time. Therefore they assert that the magician’s illusion is false and unreal, but sentient beings are truly and inherently existent.

7. The Prasangikas refute this by saying that their difference in duration is not proof for establishing one as truly existent and the other as false. If that was a valid criterion, then a prolonged illusion or dream would be more true than a shorter one. But this isn’t the case; all illusions and dreams are equally false. In response to this, the Realists present a new argument: If sentient beings are like illusions there can be no evil in killing them, just as there is no evil in killing an illusion of a person created by a magician or slaying a holographic dragon created through the wizardry of technology.

8. [11] *“If one kills or harms the magical illusion of a person, there is no mind in such a thing and therefore there’s no sin. But beings do indeed have mirage-like minds; sin and merit will, in consequence, arise.”* The Prasangikas state that killing an illusion incurs no actual karma of killing because an illusion has no mind. But illusion-like beings (i.e. non-inherent, dependently arising beings) have illusion-like minds (i.e. non-inherent, dependently arising minds), so helping or harming them results in merit or negativity respectively

9. However, it should be pointed out that in attempting to kill or harm a magician’s illusory person, for example, or proceeding to slay or injure a hologram of a flying dragon, we are not completely free from negative karma and the necessity of having to experience an unfortunate result. We don’t accumulate the *actual* karma of killing but we do accumulate a certain amount of negative karma through the force of our deliberately harmful intention to kill and destroy.

What causes a mind to exist?

10. The Realists then ask, if both the magical illusion of a person and sentient beings are alike in not being inherently existent, why does one come to be endowed with a mind while the other does not? The Prasangikas respond by stating: [12] *“There is no power in things like spells, so mirage-like minds do not occur through them. Illusions spring from various causes; thus illusions are of different kinds.”* Because there is nothing in a spell, or in a formula, or in the material components of a magical display, that has the power to bring minds into existence, no illusory mind manifests. By contrast, the cause of sentient beings does have that power.

11. A mind is something that can only arise from a source similar to itself. According to Buddhist contemplative science, the mind—which is synonymous with consciousness— doesn’t

originate from matter or energy, and it doesn't arise from nothing. The initial moment of consciousness of a fetus doesn't originate from the union of its parents' egg and sperm. It has to arise from a preceding continuum of moments of its own consciousness. This continuum of mental and sense consciousness can be traced back to a previous life in which it was joined together with another body that lived and died.

12. As a result, the mind of a fetus carries innumerable sensory and mental imprints on its consciousness from previous lives. A consciousness can only arise in dependence upon a preceding moment of its own continuum. There is no way that a formula, device, or a set of material components can newly create a conscious mind. So in an illusion there is no creation of an illusory mind. One can create illusory whales and dragons but not illusory minds.

13. We can't say, however, that a thing is real just because it's produced by something able to produce a mind, nor can we say that a thing isn't real when this capacity is lacking. A multiplicity of causes gives rise to a multiplicity of illusions.

From different causes, different effects appear

14. Shantideva continues with the next stanza: [13] *"A single cause for everything there never was! 'If ultimately, beings are in nirvana,' you will say, 'but relatively circle in samsara, [14] even Buddhahood reverts to the samsaric state. So why,' you ask, 'pursue the Bodhisattva path?' As long as there's no cutting of the causal stream, there is no halting even of illusory displays."*

15. The Prasangikas state that there doesn't exist a single cause that is capable of giving rise to a variety of different results. Nowhere in the universe is there one cause capable of producing all the effects that exist outside the mind or within it. From different causes, different effects appear; but they aren't different from each other according to whether their existence is real or illusory. It's like the apparitions of dragons and whales produced through the technological wizardry of drone light shows. You might perceive a difference between them according to whether they have wings and a tail or fins and a flipper, but not according to whether they are real or illusory.

16. The Realists who hold the belief that nirvana is a real entity take issue with the Prasangikas, who deny that things exist inherently. The Realists say that if nirvana is not truly existent, but samsara exists conventionally, then the Buddha must be in samsara because nirvana doesn't exist; so what is the point of practicing the Bodhisattva's way of life?

17. The Prasangikas respond to this by saying that all phenomena exist both conventionally *and* ultimately. Ultimately, all phenomena—including nirvana, samsara, and sentient beings—are utterly empty or devoid of any kind of true, inherent, independent self-existence. Conventionally, all phenomena—including nirvana, samsara, and sentient beings—are dependent arisings resulting from causes and conditions. As long as the continuum of causes and conditions for any phenomenon is not cut off, that phenomenon will not cease, even if it's an illusion. Once the continuum of delusions is severed, samsara will not occur, even conventionally, because delusions are the cause of samsara. Since Buddhas have done this, they have attained nirvana.

18. Nirvana is a cessation of the activities of the deluded worldly mind and its related suffering. It marks the release or liberation from worldly suffering and uncontrollable rebirths in cyclic existence, or samsara. Liberation from cyclic existence is achieved through a direct, non-conceptual realization of the emptiness of inherent existence. Thus, a being who has had a direct realization of emptiness could abide simultaneously in the world and yet be liberated from worldly suffering and uncontrollable rebirths in cyclic existence. This raises the question as to whether a Buddha is in the cycle of samsaric existence.

19. A Buddha has gained release from cyclic existence, but according to Mahayana Buddhism this doesn't imply that such a being no longer takes birth in the world. A Buddha does not take birth due to the force of mental delusions and the resulting negative karma. Rather, a Buddha appears in the world due to the force of compassion, in order to lead sentient beings to spiritual awakening. This is the point of practicing the Bodhisattva's way of life, because the Bodhisattva path will lead the practitioner to the enlightened state of Buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings.

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