

TIBETAN BUDDHISM CENTER FOR WORLD PEACE
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Shāntideva's *Bodhicharyāvatāra*, The Way of the Bodhisattva
Chapter 9: "Wisdom" Part 5: Does Everything Exist in the Mind Only?

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, and the guidance of Geshe Lobsang Nima.

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Chittamatra vs Prasangika

1. [15] ...*when the causal stream is severed, even relative phenomena do not appear.* The causal stream that is at the root of cyclic existence and its suffering is the mind-stream or continuum of consciousness that is ignorant of the true nature of reality. It is a deluded continuum that grasps at the inherent, independent self-existence of the self—"me"—and of everything else. As long as the consciousness is deluded in this way there is no possibility of its liberation from cyclic existence. Once the causal mind-stream of delusional consciousness is cut off and discontinued, cyclic existence and its suffering will no longer appear, even conventionally. At that point the true nature of reality will be understood by the mind-stream, with the result that correct consciousness *and* appearances will be experienced and known.

2. Since the proponents of the highest Prasangika Madhyamaka school of tenets deny that there is any entity or observable occurrence that can exist inherently or independently, for them a "deceived" mind is one that mistakenly conceives the opposite: that all phenomena—forms, sounds, and so forth—*have* an inherent and independent self-existence. According to the Prasangikas, a deceived mind is one which conceives things to exist in the manner in which they appear to the mistaken mind: independently self-existent, separate and disconnected from other things. In addition, the Prasangikas say that the continuum of consciousness itself is completely empty of any kind of inherent or independent nature. According to the Prasangikas, the mistaken view which asserts that anything has an inherent or independent self-existence is erroneous and false.

3. In contrast, the proponents of the Chittamatra school *do indeed* attribute inherent, independent self-existence to the mind alone—a consciousness which they call the "mind-basis-of-all". They say the mind-basis-of-all is a truly existent self that transmigrates from one lifetime to the next, somewhat similar to the concept of a soul. Although the mind-basis-of-all truly exists inherently, the Chittamatrins say it is mistaken about the way things appear to it. The entities and observable occurrences that appear to the mind as if they had an independent external existence—forms, sounds, and so forth, actually exist only in the mind according to the

Chittamatrins. Therefore for the Chittamatrins, a “deceived” mind is one which mistakenly conceives all externally appearing phenomena other than the mind-basis-of-all as if they really existed “out there”, discretely and apart from the mind. For the Chittamatrins, the mistaken view that anything has an independent external existence apart from the mind-basis-of-all is erroneous and false.

4. Thus, for different reasons the Prasangikas and Chittamatrins both say consciousness is mistaken with regard to how everything exists. The Chittamatrins affirm that the mind-basis-of-all truly exists inherently, but deny that other phenomena have any nature apart from that mind. They say that other phenomena don’t actually exist externally “out there” as they seem to appear, but exist only as an appearance in the mind. The Prasangikas differ from the Chittamatrins in that they affirm phenomena *do exist* as dependently-arising, ever-changing entities and occurrences, but deny that phenomena *self-exist* inherently and independently. They say that the phenomena which appear to the mistaken mind as if they existed separately and independently from one another, in reality exist interdependently and interconnectedly. Therefore, the two schools both agree that consciousness is incorrect in its perception of how things appear to exist, but they disagree about the mode or manner in which things actually exist. At first glance, the difference in how these two schools arrive at their conclusions appears to be quite subtle, which is why it’s so important to fully understand how fundamentally different their processes of reasoning are. One view eventually leads to liberation from suffering and one view eventually leads to isolation.

Non-inherent existence vs non-existence

5. When the Chittamatrins hear the Prasangikas assert that the mind and external objects lack any kind of inherent existence, they think the Prasangikas are saying the mind and external objects are non-existent because they have no inherent nature. In the Chittamatra system, to be inherently existent means ‘to exist’, and to be non-inherently existent means ‘to not exist’—like an illusion. Therefore, the Chittamatrins don’t understand how the Prasangikas can say that external objects don’t exist inherently as they appear, and then say that the mind that supposedly perceives them doesn’t exist inherently as it appears as well. For the Chittamatrins, anything that appears to exist but doesn’t actually exist must be an illusion. Chittamatrin: [15] *“If even that which is deceived does not exist, what is it that sees illusions?”* The Chittamatrins are arguing here that if the consciousness that is deceived by the perceptions of non-existent illusions doesn’t even exist itself, what is it then that *does* perceive illusions? The implication is that the illusions would be perceived by nothing at all.

6. To this the Prasangikas reply: [16] *But if, for you, these same illusions have no being, what, indeed, is there to be perceived?* The Prasangikas respond with the same argument the Chittamatrins used, but flip it around. If, as the Chittamatrins say, external objects are illusory and in reality don’t exist, then, even if they claim that the mind itself exists, what is it that *could* be perceived by the mind? If externally appearing objects don’t actually exist externally, despite how they appear, then they would have to be completely devoid of their own inherent nature; and in the Chittamatrin view, that would make them utterly non-existent. In that case, if the illusion itself doesn’t exist, then there would be nothing to perceive. In other words, if either of the two poles of subject and object lack existence, it is impossible for perception to occur.

7. The Chittamatrins respond: [16] *“But objects have another mode of being. That very mode is but the mind itself.”* The Chittamatrins say that, yes, in reality phenomena do not exist externally, as they appear. All possible existing phenomena are of the nature of the subjective mind—they exist as substances of the mind that apprehends them. According to the Chittamatra theory, external things are not completely nonexistent. They are not entirely one and the same as the mind because they lack the characteristics of consciousness; yet neither are they something that by nature is separate from the mind. Therefore they can’t be expressed as being either mind or separate from mind. They say that it is inexpressible, like an elephant we see in a dream. It appears to be an exterior thing but in fact is an aspect of the mind itself.

Can the mind cognize itself?

8. Prasangika: [17] *But if the mirage is the mind itself, what is then perceived by what? The Guardian of the World [the Buddha] himself has said that mind cannot be seen by mind.* [18] *In just the same way, he has said, the sword’s edge cannot cut the sword.* So the problem here, as the Prasangikas see it, is that if the perceived illusory object is all in the mind and, in fact is the mind itself, what object is being seen by what subject? The Chittamatrins maintain that the mind is of the same nature as the object that it apprehends. If the subject and object are identical, how can anything be seen by anything? The Buddha himself said that the mind cannot see the mind. Just as the sword’s edge cannot cut itself, just as the fingertip cannot touch itself, just as an acrobat cannot climb on their own shoulders, likewise the mind cannot see itself. Buddhist scripture refutes the possibility of a self-cognizing mind or consciousness that is able to apprehend itself. In the *Lankavatara-sutra* and the *Ratnachudaparipriccha-sutra* the Buddha states that the mind does not perceive itself: “It is thus: Just as the blade cannot cut itself and the fingertip cannot touch itself, even so the mind itself cannot see the mind.”

9. Here, the important point that refutes the Chittamatra view of a self-cognizing mind is that as long as the mind is held to be inherently self-existent, as the Chittamatrins assert, it can’t be dependent upon parts—it has to be partless and one; and this undermines the idea that it could be divided into being both a seen object *and* a seeing subject. In such a case both the subject and the object would be exactly the same thing—one state of consciousness—and it would be impossible to make a distinction between subject and object. So logical reasoning refutes such a mode of existence.

Why can’t the mind cognize itself?

1. The Chittamatrins dispute this idea by saying why shouldn’t the mind know itself? Chittamatrin: [18] *“But it’s like the flame that perfectly illuminates itself.”* Just as the flame of a lamp illuminates the surrounding darkness, at the same time it perfectly illuminates itself. In a similar way, they say, the mind is able to be conscious of both itself and other phenomena.

2. Prasangika: [19] *The flame, in fact, can never light itself. And why? Because the darkness never dims it!* Here the Prasangikas respond by saying that the Chittamatrins are making the implied assumption that if a flame couldn’t illuminate itself, it wouldn’t be able to illuminate anything else. But to say that a flame illuminates itself is just a conventional expression; it’s not strictly true. The light of a flame doesn’t illuminate *itself* at all. Since there is no darkness in a flame, it has no need of illumination. What is there in a flame that needs to be illuminated? If one were to apply the same logic of the Chittamatrins to darkness, it would follow that just as a

flame illuminates itself so does darkness darken itself. But since darkness is the absence of light, it has no need to obscure itself. What is there in darkness that needs to be darkened? If darkness did actually obscure *itself*, it would follow that when an object, such as a pot, was placed in darkness that was obscuring itself, it would be the darkness itself that couldn't be seen while the pot would remain visible, which is absurd!

3. But the Chittamatrins object to this line of reasoning by saying that in the context they are discussing, the illuminator and that which is illuminated are not two separate things. They say the flame illuminates itself by its very nature just as a lapis lazuli gemstone is blue in and of itself. Chittamatrin: [19] *"The blueness of a thing by nature blue, depends, unlike a crystal, upon nothing else."* The Chittamatrins are saying a distinction can be made in the way that things are blue. There is a blue color that arises in dependence on external factors, such as when a clear crystal becomes blue by being placed on a blue cloth. On the other hand, there is a blue color which exists independently of any outside condition, as in the case of lapis lazuli, which is blue by nature.

4. Chittamatrin: [20] *"Likewise some perceptions come from other things, while some do not."* So, the Chittamatrins argue, just as there is one kind of thing that depends on an external factor, and another kind of thing that is independent of any outside condition, so are some perceptions, like the perceptions of the eye consciousness, dependent upon external objects such as form, while others, like the perceptions of the self-cognizing consciousness, are focused inward and perceive their awareness only. [20] Prasangika: *But something that's by nature blue has never of itself imposed blueness on its non-blue self.* The Prasangikas are saying that the example of the blueness of lapis lazuli being independent of any outside condition is not valid. It's evident to everyone that the blueness of lapis lazuli doesn't exist without depending upon anything else; it is dependent upon other causes and conditions. It's like saying the color of a person's skin is independent of any outside causes and conditions.

5. The discourse then returns to the previous example of the flame of a lamp: [21] *The phrase "The lamp illuminates itself" the mind can know and formulate. But what is there to know and say that "mind is self-illuminating?"* When the Chittamatrins say "the flame of a lamp illuminates itself," this is understood and expressed in terms of an observing mind that is distinct from the flame itself. But when they say, "the mind illuminates (or knows) itself," what exactly is the state of a mind that can do this?

6. Is that which knows the mind to be self-illuminating identical with that mind, or is it some other mind that knows this? If the mind is like a flame that is in its nature illuminating as the Chittamatrins say, then they should assert that the mind is not self-knowing but is merely in its nature aware and knowing. But if they say the mind is self-cognizing and able to perceive and know itself, there has to be a method by which the mind is able to observe itself, similar to how we're able look at an image of our face in a mirror. If that were the case then the consciousness would have to produce, moment-to-moment, an endless series of substantially different consciousnesses to be conscious of one another—like mirroring streams of consciousness. If this isn't feasible, then what apprehender of consciousness can there be?

7. [22] *The mind, indeed, is never seen by anything. And therefore, whether it can know or cannot know itself, is like the beauty of a barren woman's daughter: something that is pointless to discuss.* Therefore, the Prasangikas assert that if the moment-to-moment dependently arising continuum of consciousness is never perceived by anything—whether by itself or by a mirroring continuum of consciousness distinct from it—it's meaningless to examine whether it is self-knowing or not. To discuss the characteristics of something which is never perceived is as futile as discussing the beauty of a barren woman's daughter. It is completely meaningless.

8. However, the Chittamatrins come back with the claim that although they can't prove it through valid perception, nevertheless the self-knowing mind can be known inferentially. Chittamatrin: [23] *"But if the mind is not self-knowing, how does it remember what it knew?"* Prasangika: *We say that, like the poison of the water rat, it's through the links with things experienced that memory occurs.*" So the Chittamatrins say that in order for recollection to occur, there must be a prior experience in which the consciousness was aware of itself, otherwise recollection could not occur. They say we don't simply remember the object that was apprehended but we also remember the consciousness experiencing itself apprehending the object. For example, due to a previous perception of the color blue, there later occurs the recollection of the object—blue—and the recollection of the subject—"I saw blue." So, together with a previous experience of the object there is a self-cognizing awareness of the subject—the visual consciousness that was perceiving the blue. That's how, they say, a later recollection that "I saw blue" occurs. So because of the process of memory, the Chittamatrins say they are able to establish the existence of self-cognizing consciousness.

9. But the Prasangikas reply that the fact the mind can now remember that it experienced blue is not evidence that, in the past, it knew or experienced itself perceiving blue. The mind's present memory of itself experiencing blue in the past comes from the earlier perception of a blue thing and from the fact that in every experience subject and object are always interdependently related. For example, one never finds a subjective consciousness of blueness divorced from some kind of blue object—whether it's a blue sky, a blue flower, an imaginary expanse of blueness appearing to the mind, or whatever it may be. In the same way, when one remembers a blue object experienced in the past, there also occurs the recollection of the subject that perceived the blue. But this is not because of some independent consciousness that apprehends blue separately from the blue thing that was experienced.

10. The Prasangikas say the conscious awareness of the object is remembered simply owing to its having had a relationship with the object itself. They illustrate this by using the example of the venom of a water rat. If you were bitten by a poisonous water rat you would, at that moment, be aware that you'd been bitten, but not that you'd been poisoned. Only much later, when the venom began to take effect would you correctly come to the conclusion that you had been poisoned when the rat bit you. In other words, a newly arising consciousness would occur where you would think, "I was poisoned when the rat bit me."

11. If we compare this example to the previous example of recalling a blue object, the simple memory of the color blue corresponds to the simple memory of the rat bite; the thought "I saw blue" corresponds to the thought "I was poisoned." Just as the present understanding that one

was poisoned does not require the awareness at the time of the bite that one was being poisoned, in the same way, the thought “I remember blue” does not require the self-awareness “I am seeing blue” at the time when the color was experienced. According to the Prasangika argument, because subject and object are necessary interdependent aspects of all experience, the memory of blue automatically implies the thought “I remember blue.” In itself, memory is no proof of a self-cognizing mind.

12. [24] Chittamatra: *“In certain cases the mind can see the minds of others, how then not itself?”* The Chittamatrins then assert that if it’s possible for those who have achieved great levels of meditative concentration to perceive the minds of other people who are far away, how is it that the mind cannot know something as close to it as itself? The Chittamatrin argument is that if it is possible to observe the minds of other distant beings, there could be no flaw in the statement that awareness perceives itself, which is right there with you.

13. [24 cont.] Prasangika: *But through the application of a magic balm, the eye may see the treasure, but the salve it does not see.* The Prasangikas respond that this type of logic does not apply to the discussion of a self-cognizing mind. They say the situation is more like that of a specially empowered eye ointment that, if applied to the eyes, would make it possible to observe a buried pot of treasure; but the ointment itself, which would of course be very close to the eye, would not be seen. Similarly, an accomplished yogi’s high level of meditative concentration empowers the yogi’s mind and makes it possible for the yogi to perceive the minds of others; but the mind of meditative concentration itself, which is of course an aspect of the yogi’s mind, cannot be perceived.

14. At this point, the Chittamatrins put forth the following question: “Do you Prasangikas refute the entire presentation of cognition, including the experiencing, seeing and hearing of events? If you take the above stance with regard to self-cognizing awareness, this invalidates awareness.” To which the Prasangikas respond: [25] *It’s not indeed our purpose to disprove experiences of sight or sound or knowing. Our aim is here to undermine the cause of sorrow: the thought that such phenomena have true existence.*”

15. The Prasangikas are not refuting valid conventional experiences of consciousness such as sight, hearing, and cognition. It’s impossible to deny them, and there is no need to do so because they are not the cause of suffering in cyclic existence. The Prasangikas are attacking the fundamental cause of suffering in cyclic existence: the mind that believes in, and clings to, the *true, inherent, independent self-existence* of all things, including the mind. If an ultimately existent entity did exist, then things would exist through their own mode of being, rather than as dependent arisings. If that were the case, then when logical analysis was applied to phenomena, truly independent self-existing things should present themselves. But instead, logical analysis finds no truly inherent, independent self-existing thing, including cognition. That is the difference between something not being found by reasoning, and something being invalidated by reasoning.

Do forms truly exist?

1. At this point the Chittamatrins begin a new argument concerning what they consider to be truly existing forms. [26] Chittamatrin: *“Illusions are not other than the mind.”* Prasangika: *And yet you don’t consider them the same. How could they [illusions] not be different if the mind is*

real? And how can mind be real if you deny a difference? The Chittamatrins say that since illusory external objects do not exist anywhere other than in the mind, they are not essentially distinguishable from the mind, nor do they exist as the mind. Form and so on do not exist as external objects, but they are not simply non-existent. They are not of a different nature than the mind, nor are they the mind itself. Because if the illusory external objects were identical with the mind, this would undermine the mind's inherent existence, which is one and partless. They say therefore that the external objects are just like a mirage hanging in space—a groundless appearance—and that the mind is by nature free from all aspects and appearances. It is like a sphere of pure crystal. They say this resolves any possible flaw in their position.

2. The Prasangikas respond by saying that if the Chittamatrins hold the mind to be inherently self-existent and that by nature it is free from all aspects and appearances, how can the appearance to the mind of external objects *not* be something different from it? The Chittamatrins say that external objects are illusory and unreal, while they believe the mind is inherently existent and real; and between real and unreal there is no common ground. And if, as they say, the illusory and unreal external objects are not anything other than the mind, then it follows that the mind is illusory and unreal as well.

3. But if the mind were unreal, the Chittamatrins say, it couldn't function as a perceiver of objects. The Prasangikas reply: [27] *Although it is unreal, a mirage can be seen; and that which sees is just the same.* Chittamatra: *"But samsara must be based on something real, or else it is like empty space."* The Prasangikas say that, in just the same way that an object, though unreal (i.e. dependently arising) and illusory, is said by the Chittamatrins to be perceived by the mind, likewise the mind, though unreal and illusory, may act as a perceiver of objects.

4. But the Chittamatrins object to this reasoning, saying that samsara has to be supported by a really existing mind. Otherwise, if the mind were not truly, inherently existent, then samsara would simply be nothing, like empty space. It would be impossible for the appearances of samsara to arise, for they would be without anything to support them. But, the Prasangikas ask, if samsara is real, is it identical with the mind or different from it? If samsara is identical to the mind, it would be impossible to escape from samsara. On the other hand, if it is different from the mind, that would be inconsistent with the Chittamatra position that asserts everything exists in the mind.

5. [28] Prasangika: *But how could the unreal be causally effective, even if it rests on something real? This mind of yours is isolated and alone—alone, in solitude, and unaccompanied.* The Prasangikas reason that if samsara is like this—it is unreal—it is causally ineffective. Therefore, even if samsara had as its basis a real, inherently existing mind, as the Chittamatrins assert, how could one be either trapped in it or liberated from it? An unreal thing cannot be supported by anything. If it could, it would become a functioning thing, and be a part of the sequence of cause and effect.

6. If, according to the Chittamatrin way of thinking, the mind was something truly and inherently self-existent, then it could not possibly be related to or dependent upon any objects; it would be an isolated, independent, self-knowing, self-illuminating mind that was a solitary cognition of itself.

7. [29] *If the mind indeed is free of objects, all beings must be Buddhas, Thus-Gone and enlightened. And so, what purpose can there be in saying thus, that there is “Only Mind”?* If the mind is indeed inherently, independently self-existent and therefore without a perceived object, that also means it is empty of being a perceiving subject. According to the Chittamatrins, when the “emptiness of subject and object” is actualized, ultimate reality manifests. So according to their argument it would then follow that all beings with such a mind would have already manifested ultimate reality and would have been Tathagatas—fully enlightened Buddhas—from the very beginning, without needing to make an effort on the path. In which case, what is the point of elaborating a philosophical system that says everything is mind? What benefit would there be in trying to prove that all phenomena are of the nature of the mind only?

What do we actually see?

1. According to current science, what we see with our eyes is only a tiny band of frequency called ‘visible light’ within the electromagnetic spectrum. The entire spectrum of what we call ‘light’ is estimated to be just 0.5 percent of what exists in the entire Universe. The only band of frequency that we can ‘see’ is a fractional smear of that 0.5 percent, which is known as ‘visible light’. For all our lives, our eyes have relied on this one narrow band of electromagnetic light radiation to gather information about our world. Though our sun’s visible light appears white to us, it is really the combined light of the individual rainbow colors with wavelengths ranging from violet at 380 nanometers to red at 700 nanometers. We decode this small band of visible light into the objects that appear to us and that we identify and label as the external world we see. Many non-human species can see light within frequencies outside the human visible spectrum.

What do we actually hear?

1. In humans, sound waves enter into the ear and reach the eardrum. These sound waves set the thin membrane of the eardrum in motion, causing vibration through the middle ear bones, then into a membrane within the inner ear and the hair cells that are attached to it. This produces streams of pulses in the nerve fibers, which are transmitted through auditory pathways to the brain. Our brain then decodes these pulses of vibration into sounds that we identify and label as what we hear in the external world. Several animal species are able to hear frequencies well beyond the human hearing range, including dogs, dolphins, bats, elephants and whales.

What do we actually smell, taste, and touch?

1. For humans, smell occurs when chemical compounds bind to receptors within the nasal cavity, transmitting a signal through the olfactory system where the sensory input is processed by parts of the brain which decode the chemical compounds into odors that we identify and label as smells in the external world. These smells also serve to trigger our memory and emotion. Humans have far fewer active odor receptor genes than other primates and mammals.

2. The perception of flavor is a combination of auditory, taste, touch, and smell sensory information. Smell plays the biggest role in the sensation of flavor. When we chew, the tongue manipulates food to release smell, and these smells enter the nasal cavity. The smell of food has the sensation of being in the mouth during the process of chewing. The human tongue can only distinguish five qualities of taste, while the nose can distinguish among hundreds of substances,

even in minute quantities. This sensory information is processed by parts of the brain which decode the information into what we identify and label as tastes in our mouth.

3. The sense of touch is produced through a network of neural structures in the brain and body that produce the perception of touch, temperature, body position and pain. The sense of touch begins when receptors in the skin or internal organs sense a stimulus such as physical pressure on the skin. Activation of these receptors leads to activation of sensory neurons that convey signals to the spinal cord. Sensory information is then processed in the spinal cord to reflexes, and is also conveyed to the brain for conscious perception of touch. The neural pathways that go to the brain are structured so that information about the location of the physical stimulus is preserved. In this way, a “touch sense” map of the skin and body is created.

We are experiencing a kind of virtual reality

1. Consciousness—awareness—in its prime state cannot pick up objects or sit in a chair just as two radio stations on different wavelengths cannot connect. We therefore experience human reality through a vehicle called a ‘body’ which *does* match the frequency band of human reality and can interact with it. The five senses and systems of the body decode information from this frequency field and produce the experience of a physical world.

2. The five senses decode frequencies of waveform information through the antenna we call eyes, ears, skin, nose and tongue, and transforms them into electrical signals which are communicated to the brain. This, in turn, decodes the electrical information into digital and holographic information that we experience as a physical external world when *there is no ‘external’ world* as we perceive it. A computer or smartphone decodes information from Wi-Fi into the form that we see on the screen and the text and images we are observing are *inside* the computer or phone in the same way that perceived physical reality is *inside* us. Different areas of the brain decode those signals into the perception of sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste to construct the sense of reality that we experience as an external world when, in that so-called physical form, it only exists in our mind.

The main difference between Chittamatra and Prasangika

1. For the most part, the view that there is no independently existing external world as we perceive it—similar to the way current science describes it—is shared by both the Chittamatrins and the Prasangikas. The main difference between them is the Chittamatrins assert that the mind—consciousness itself—is inherently self-existent whereas the Prasangikas assert that the mind, or consciousness, is a dependently arising entity that is empty of inherent existence. The Chittamatra view, if it were correct, would ultimately lead to permanent isolation, for a truly and inherently self-existent entity could not possibly be related to or dependent upon anything other than itself. On the other hand, the Prasangika view will ultimately lead to expansion and interconnectedness within an energy field of consciousness, and an ever-changing mind and body that has the potential to become an expression of infinite wisdom and awareness for the benefit of all beings.

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