

TIBETAN BUDDHISM CENTER FOR WORLD PEACE
San Antonio, Texas

Shāntideva's *Bodhicharyāvatāra*, The Way of the Bodhisattva
Chapter 9: "Wisdom" Parts 6.1—6.3: Emptiness and the Middle Way

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, Lama Zopa Rinpoche, Geshe Lundup Sopa, Jeffrey Hopkins, Guy Newland, and the guidance of Geshe Lobsang Nima.

TBCWP Sessions 18, 19 & 20: Sunday, August 27, September 3 & 10, 2023

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

Introduction to Part Six of the "Wisdom" chapter

1. As we learned in the previous section of chapter nine, the Chittamatra (Mind Only) view that asserts external objects do not exist anywhere other than in the mind is quite close to the highest Prasangika view. Where the Chittamatrins make a fundamental mistake, which, if it were true, would lead to permanent isolation, is in their assertion that the mind—the subjective consciousness—has a truly independent self-existence. Both the Prasangika and Chittamatra views have much in common with the findings of current neuroscience, which affirm that the world we experience is an active brain-based construction; it is not the world as it 'really' is. According to neuroscience, the world as it really is—for all conscious creatures—is hidden behind a sensory veil.

2. Our bodies' senses, which are antennae we call eyes, ears, skin, nose, and tongue, decode the mix of electromagnetic frequencies, mechanical waveforms, and quantum fields that move through and around us, and translate them to our brains as the perceptions and conscious awareness of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch that we identify and label as the external physical world of our 'reality'. According to current neuroscience, the inner world is actually *all* of our experience, not just the experiences that 'feel' as if they're happening inside us, like our thoughts and emotions. In that sense, the reality we perceive—or that we believe we perceive—is like a reliable kind of hallucination. In large part, Buddhism would agree with this scientific view. Lama Zopa Rinpoche has said that what our senses subjectively decode into that which appears to us as the phenomena of the objective world is so subtle, *it's as if it was an illusion*—but it's not.

3. However, whereas science takes as a working assumption that consciousness comes from the brain, which is matter, Buddhism holds that consciousness is not in the nature of matter. According to Buddhism, consciousness is merely clear and aware; it is not made from material particles and is therefore not a product of the brain. Consciousness may be embodied in and intimately engaged with the brain and matter, but is not born of it. Consciousness, which is synonymous with mind in Buddhism, is an ever-present, ever-flowing, moment-to-moment

stream of awareness and clarity which continuously arises in dependence upon previous moments of itself which are beginningless. It is not made by a creator and has always existed. It engages in an interconnected, interdependent relationship with all that it is aware of.

4. Mahayana Buddhism's position is that of the 'Middle Way': the world isn't a projection of our minds, but it isn't completely independent of our minds, either. There is no fixed reality that is independent of any concept, mental process, or observer. Rather there is interdependence. In this way, Buddhism avoids falling into the view of either nihilism or eternalism. Phenomena arise through a process of interdependent causes and conditions, but nothing exists in itself or by itself. Simply put, no 'reality in and of itself' exists. Phenomena only exist in dependence on other phenomena. In the sixth part of the 'Wisdom' chapter, Shantideva refutes the lower schools' objections to the view of emptiness and establishes that freedom from suffering can only be achieved through a direct realization of emptiness and the path of the Middle Way.

Why we have strong desire for the illusion-like appearances we perceive

1. Other schools: [30] *"Even if we know that all is like illusion, How," you ask, "will this dispel afflictive passion? Magicians may indeed themselves desire the mirage-women they themselves create."* The question put forth here by the lower schools is, how does realizing that all phenomena are illusion-like eliminate our delusions and afflictive emotions? After all, a magician who creates the illusion of a beautiful woman can still develop attachment and desire for her, even though he has created her and knows she is nothing more than a mirage.

2. A modern-day example of something similar to this is the attachment and desire we can feel for an image of a person or thing we see in a movie, video, or picture on the internet. We know that what we're looking at is not actually a real person or a real chocolate cake, for example, yet we can still muster a good deal of attachment and desire based upon a mere image produced by a bunch of colored pixels. Why is this so?

3. [31] *The reason is they have not rid themselves of habits of desiring objects of perception, and when they gaze upon such things, their aptitude for emptiness is weak indeed.* When we look at an image of whoever or whatever it is we find so attractive and delicious, the tendency in us to perceive that image's lack of truly independent self-existence is very weak. Although we realize intellectually that the image is simply a collection of pixels and is unreal, nevertheless the object appears to us as if it is real, and because of our instinctive tendency to apprehend that object as truly existent we instinctively have feelings of desire for it.

4. And so, when we see the image of the desirous object, because of our lack of familiarity with emptiness—which is the antidote to afflictive attachment, how can we possibly resist our strong hankering for it? It's as if the object that image represents truly exists out there the way it appears to us. There is no understanding of emptiness in our mind to counteract our fixation on the seemingly real and substantial existence of the thing. However, if we realized that the same object, if we encountered it in our ordinary experience, is not at all independently real or self-existent, we wouldn't feel an interest in its illusory image or have hopes of involvement with it.

5. As Nagarjuna says, the root of disturbing and destructive states of mind such as craving is thought born from conceptual elaboration. The realization of emptiness gradually eliminates

such conceptual thought-elaboration and leads to the destruction of ignorance. Finally, the mind itself assumes the nature of emptiness. It becomes without a trace of darkness, so that even the subtlest seeds of ignorance are eliminated, never to return.

The door is always open

1. Lama Zopa Rinpoche says we've been completely trapped in a kind of hallucination. By allowing our ignorance to 'lead us by the nose' and not thinking about emptiness, we continuously create the cause for more hallucination in the future. He says we're like a fly inside a house where there are windows and doors that are open, but the fly doesn't go out through them. It doesn't go to where there is an opening but keeps bumping up against the closed windows over and over again, not taking advantage of the freedom offered by all the open windows and doors. No one is keeping the fly trapped in the house; the fly stays there, all on its own. Even though there is plenty of space in which it can escape, the fly only looks where there is no escape and flies around and around. It would be so easy to get out—there would be no hardship involved at all—still, it doesn't do that. But the door is always open.

2. Lama Zopa says our lives are just like this example. The door of opportunity to attain liberation from the suffering of cyclic existence is always there, always open. All phenomena—which include the 'I', the actions that the 'I' takes, and all the objects of the 'I's' actions—have always been empty since beginningless time. It's not as if those phenomena have been empty at some times and inherently existent at others. They've *never* been inherently existent. The opportunity to realize emptiness has always been there and always will be. When we are able to generate that realization of emptiness we will eliminate the root of samsara, which is the ignorance that grasps at the conception of the independent self-existence of the ego—the 'I'—and all other phenomena. By eliminating the root ignorance, everything that stems from that root will come to an end—all the disturbing and afflictive emotions, all the harmful and destructive actions that arise from them, the karma generated by those actions, and the entirety of cyclic existence itself. We will attain the complete cessation of suffering and its causes. Even though the opportunity to liberate ourselves from all of this has always been there, so far we haven't taken that opportunity.

3. Like the fly, we haven't paid attention to or turned toward the door of liberation, which is the realization of emptiness. Emptiness is the very nature of all phenomena and is the object of wisdom. But we continuously follow our ignorance and keep circling around towards suffering because we *believe* the view of ignorance, and think that the object of ignorance—inherent self-existence—which is false, is actually true. Lama Zopa says this has been our fundamental mistake.

Why meditating on emptiness can remove all delusions and their imprints

1. [32] *By training in this aptitude for emptiness, the habit to perceive real things will be relinquished. By training in the thought "There isn't anything," this view itself will also be abandoned.* By developing an understanding and awareness of the view of emptiness, we will eventually let go of grasping at truly independent self-existence; and especially by meditating on the emptiness of emptiness, we'll come to let go of the grasping at emptiness itself as being truly existent.

2. Only through developing familiarity and experience with the view of emptiness for a long time will we finally be able to shed all traces of grasping at the ingrained belief in the inherent reality of things. His Holiness the Dalai Lama says if we habitually build up the aptitude for understanding emptiness by logically perceiving all things as empty of any kind of independent self-existence, experientially realize this, and repeat this experience again and again, then the strong propensity we have for grasping onto self-established inherent existence can be dispelled. It takes great familiarity with emptiness before we can deconstruct our mistaken views about how everything exists and stop believing in those mistaken views.

3. If we can perceive the absence of an inherent, 'built-in', essential nature in all phenomena, then when phenomena appear, they can be seen as deceptive, or not truly existent in the way we've previously been conditioned to think of them. As a result, when we look upon or experience what to us seem to be 'attractive' or 'repulsive' phenomena, and attachment or aversion toward them arises, we can actually ascertain that they do not truly exist in the way they appear to us. This will gradually diminish the occurrence of our attachment and aversion, both of which result from conceiving objects, situations, and events as existing in the manner in which they appear. This false way of apprehending things has been with us since time without beginning, which is why we must be persistent and habitual in our practice of familiarizing ourselves with the view of emptiness.

The emptiness of emptiness

1. Additionally, when we realize that the emptiness of inherent existence *itself* is empty we will come to realize what is called the 'emptiness of emptiness'. Emptiness is a mode of perception which dependently arises in relation to each and every knowable phenomenon: the emptiness of a cup, the emptiness of a thought, the emptiness of a self, the emptiness of a relationship, the emptiness of a quantum field, and so on. The more we can logically establish for ourselves that this is so, we'll gradually be able to let go of the conception that emptiness itself has some kind of true existence. Because we have the habit, from beginningless time, of taking phenomena as being independently self-existent, we have the strong tendency, born of ignorance, to think that when we have a direct realization of emptiness we will have an experience of some kind of independently self-existing thing called 'emptiness'. We expect there will be some sort of appearance or experience of emptiness that our mind will be able to positively identify and we will think, "Aha! *this* is emptiness! I've finally realized it!" But according to the great Buddhist meditators and teachers, when one has a direct realization of emptiness nothing at all appears to the mind; the only thing that is ascertained is the absence of inherent existence, which is the object of negation when one meditates on emptiness.

2. A common analogy for this is to imagine that you have a particular drawer in your house where you have always kept your keys. Whenever you put your keys away you put them in that drawer, and whenever you need to get your keys you open that drawer and there they are. Now imagine that one day you open the drawer expecting to find your keys and they aren't there. The only thing that occurs is that where you expected to find your keys, instead you found an absence of your keys—nothing more than that. No bells, no whistles, no flashing lights or a voice announcing, "Here is the absence of your keys!" Aside from the initial panicky feeling that your keys aren't where you thought they were, nothing is there in place of your keys—just a definite and certain realization that your keys aren't there.

3. This kind of realization of an absence is what is called a non-affirming negation. Emptiness is a non-affirming negation. A direct realization of emptiness is a direct realization that there is no inherent existence whatsoever. In realizing that, there is no affirmation of any kind of positive phenomena. Our minds are habituated to be constantly thinking of positive phenomena, constantly seeing true existence, when in reality what is actually there is the lack of true existence. We are not used to thinking of a negative phenomenon that is just a lack of something. This is why it's important for us to do some analytical thinking about the emptiness of emptiness—that emptiness itself is empty of being a truly existing phenomenon. Otherwise, we could get the panicky feeling that a realization of emptiness would be a realization of our non-existence, which isn't the case.

7. [33] *“There is nothing”—when this is asserted, no thing is there to be examined. How can a “nothing”, wholly unsupported, rest before the mind as something present?* When it is said that “There is nothing—no thing exists,” this means that no truly, inherently existing thing exists. How then could a mind that grasps at the true, inherent existence of emptiness remain when the basis for such a misconception—grasping at true, inherent existence—has been removed? Since the emptiness of true, inherent existence has been established, there is no basis upon which such a misconception could possibly occur.

8. All perceptible objects and occurrences, including emptiness, appear to us as if they existed as independent entities and events, separated from our own consciousness and everything else by space and time. When we investigate these objects and occurrences, thoroughly and logically, to find out whether or not they really have an independent self-existence, we will eventually arrive at the conclusion that all of these entities and events don't actually exist in the way they *seem* to exist. At the moment we arrive at this conclusion, nothing appears before our mind except the emptiness that is the absence of inherent self-existence, which is the object of refutation. His Holiness the Dalai Lama says that when the awareness of this conclusion gradually diminishes in intensity for us, we should repeatedly bring to mind the arguments for the lack of inherent self-existence and continue to reinforce the strength of our investigation into it. It's important to hold on to the experience of the sheer emptiness of the object of refutation, i.e. the ascertainment of the absence or emptiness of inherent self-existence.

The Bodhisattva pathway to Buddhahood

1. [34] *When something and its nonexistence both are absent from before the mind, no other option does the latter have: it comes to perfect rest, from concepts free.* Eventually, when the mistaken view of the true, inherent existence of all phenomena *and* the true, inherent existence of emptiness no longer appear to the mind, since there can be no other aspect of true, inherent existence, the mind will abide in the resulting pacified state in which all conceptuality has ceased. When the mind continues to meditate upon this reality for a long time, eventually the dharmakaya, or “truth body” of a Buddha, in which there is no conceptual activity at all, will be realized.

2. In his commentary, His Holiness the Dalai Lama says this stanza is referring to the path of the Bodhisattva which culminates in the enlightened state of Buddhahood. By repeatedly developing and improving our awareness and understanding of emptiness, we will eventually

come to realize that all objects and occurrences, including emptiness itself, are utterly lacking in any kind of independent self-existence. First we need to receive instruction in the appropriate written treatises and texts from a trusted spiritual mentor and guide. In this way we gain understanding based on the verses of the texts. This understanding comes as a result of both listening to teachings as well as reading the appropriate texts for ourselves. Then through patient investigation and repeated reflection—thinking about those teachings and texts—a sense of certainty about them arises in our minds. This requires an extensive understanding of the view that all phenomena are empty of inherent existence. This understanding, in turn, depends on us developing our capacity for concentration. When we’ve done that, we can eventually gain understanding through meditation focused on the view of emptiness; and it will be stable.

3. In order to gain perfect certainty of that view, His Holiness says it is probably necessary to have the support of meditative concentration, or *samadhi*, in which full mental alertness and sharpness is maintained in a state of calm abiding. If the mind has little stability or capacity for single-pointed concentration, it is unlikely that one could deeply ascertain the emptiness of an inherent nature of all entities for longer than a fleeting instant.

4. This development of understanding, concentration, and ascertainment occurs as part of a Bodhisattva practitioner’s spiritual progress within the context of what are termed the *Five Paths*, which we previously discussed in Shantideva’s eighth chapter on Meditative Concentration. We actually enter the first of the five paths when we reach the point where our minds become so habituated to bodhicitta that the mere sight of an ant, or a bird, or other animal, person, or sentient being causes us to think from the depths of our hearts, *when will I ever attain enlightenment for this being?*

5. At the present, most of us are still struggling with our own afflictive emotions, not to mention our less-than-stellar generosity, ethics, and patience, to be able to achieve much more than a kind of fabricated bodhicitta which requires the effort of our reasoning and analysis. However, the achievement of one’s success in anything does *not* require being perfect to begin with, so with the persistent application of logic and reasoning coupled with an open heart and mind, our bodhicitta will continue to grow and strengthen to the point where it will become clear to us that we are firmly positioned on the path to liberation and enlightenment.

6. The first of the five paths of a Bodhisattva, called the *Path of Accumulation*, is actually three paths in one—a lesser, middle, and greater path—in which the aspiring Bodhisattva gradually develops the accumulation of *sonam*, or merit, which is the positive force and potential that builds up in someone who practices with a good heart imbued with wisdom. It is said that it can take a very long time to accumulate the enormous amount of *sonam* needed to complete this path, but His Holiness says that with a genuine attitude of bodhicitta, such vast amounts of *sonam* are quickly and easily achieved.

7. In the second path, called the *Path of Preparation*, the dualistic appearance of subject and object becomes increasingly subtle. Finally, at the initial moment of perceiving emptiness directly, the Bodhisattva enters the third path, called the *Path of Seeing*, in which all dualistic appearances, even the most subtle ones, are completely removed. Then, like water pouring into water, there occurs an experience with no sense of distinction between subject and object.

8. In the fourth path, called the *Path of Meditation*, the Bodhisattva becomes more and more familiar with their realization of emptiness and uses it to cleanse their mind. They are in the process of eliminating the obscurations to liberation from cyclic existence, called *afflictive obscurations*, which include afflictive emotions and negative karma, and the obscurations to omniscience, called *cognitive obscurations*, which involve the mistaken belief that the three spheres of subject, object, and action are inherently existent. When a non-conceptual realization of emptiness occurs to the Bodhisattva while in deep meditative absorption, all of their conceptual elaborations are subdued and pacified. But when the Bodhisattva arises from their meditative absorption, their dualistic appearances of subject and object return even though they have had a direct realization of emptiness. Finally there occurs what His Holiness calls ‘diamond-like concentration’. Diamond-like concentration acts as the direct remedy to one’s cognitive obscurations, and as a result, omniscient wisdom arises.

9. When omniscience occurs the Bodhisattva reaches the fifth and final path, called the *Path of No More Learning* and achieves the enlightened state of a Buddha. Once omniscient wisdom arises all conceptual elaboration and activity vanishes, and it never recurs. The mind has no other object to fix on, no ideas like “It is empty” or “It is not empty.” All conceptual thought and activity is brought to complete stillness. This is a state of equality, unceasing and unborn, which is the very character of space. There is no name for it; it is beyond thought and explanation. It is the unmanifested, inconceivable aspect of a Buddha known as the Dharmakaya, the sphere of wisdom-awareness, the fundamental ground of consciousness from which Buddhas arise and manifest for the benefit of others and to which they return after their manifestation dissolves.

Objections of the other schools

1. At this point in Shantideva’s discourse, the other schools of tenets put forth an objection. They argue that if a Buddha has no conceptual mind then how can a Buddha possibly teach the Dharma to sentient beings? It is contradictory to maintain that a Buddha has no conceptual thoughts and at the same time can teach the Dharma.

2. When Shantideva presents these objections of the other schools, we shouldn’t think that he is doing so only to refute the positions of strictly defined schools of philosophy such as the Vaibashikas, Sautrantikas, and Chittamatrins. His exchange of logical arguments are equally applicable to our own ways of thinking. As we each progress in our analysis and search for the ultimate nature of things, we may well arrive at our own conclusions that in some ways are similar to those of the earlier schools of Buddhist tenets. This is when the critical examination and consequentialist approach of the Prasangikas becomes particularly relevant in seeing whether our own internally formed views are justified or not. It becomes a means by which we can weigh our own insights against the light of further possibilities that we have not yet considered, and it enables us to gain even deeper and more far-reaching understanding.

Prasangika’s response

1. Prasangika: [35] *As the wishing jewel and tree of miracles fulfill and satisfy all hopes and wishes, likewise, through their prayers for those who might be trained, the physical appearance of the Conquerors occurs.* The Prasangikas respond to the realist schools’ objections by saying that just as wish-fulfilling trees and gems have no conceptual minds but

can still fulfill and satisfy the hopes and wishes of those who pray to them, similarly, although Buddhas have no conceptions, through the force of their having made prayers when they were Bodhisattvas, and through the positive force and potential of sonam/merit accumulated by their disciples, Buddhas spontaneously manifest in forms that physically appear to sentient beings and they turn the wheel of Dharma for the benefit of sentient beings. In reality Buddhas have no conceptual minds although they manifest as if they did.

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