

TIBETAN BUDDHISM CENTER FOR WORLD PEACE
San Antonio, Texas

Shāntideva's *Bodhicharyāvatāra*, The Way of the Bodhisattva
Chapter 9: "Wisdom"
Part 9.1: The Nature of Existence

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; *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, translated by Wulstan Fletcher and the Padmakara Translation Group; *Science and Philosophy in the Indian Buddhist Classics, Volume 2: The Mind; Debate in Tibetan Buddhism* by Daniel E. Perdue; and teachings by Lama Tsongkhapa, His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, Geshe Drakpa Gelek, Lama Zopa Rinpoche, Ven. Robina Courtin, Geshe Lhundup Sopa, Jeffrey Hopkins, Guy Newland, Alexander Berzin, and the guidance of Geshe Lobsang Nima.

TBCWP Session 29: Sunday, November 12, 2023

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

What is the nature of existence?

1. If we look at various definitions of the word "existence" we'll find statements such as, "existence is the state of being real or participating in reality," and "existence is having real being, whether material or spiritual," or "existence is reality as presented in experience," and "existence is the manner of being that is common to every mode of being." It is this last definition: "the manner of being that is common to every mode of being," that is the closest match to the Buddha's view of existence. From the Buddhist perspective, the manner of being that is common to every mode of being is *dependent arising*.
2. When we observe all existent phenomena through the lens of logical analysis and reasoning, we will discover that all existent phenomena arise in dependence upon multiple causes and conditions. For instance, we find that all phenomena which are capable of functioning, that is, capable of yielding benefit or harm, necessarily depend upon impermanence. This means they are not frozen in some kind of independent, self-existent permanent state, unable to either change or move, and incapable of having an effect on, or being affected by, other phenomena.
3. Phenomena also exist in dependence on relativity. For example, 'longer' exists only in relation to 'shorter', 'higher' exists only in relation to 'lower', 'nearness' in relation to 'distance', 'thinner' in relation to 'thicker', and so on. Subject and object are also mutually dependent: an object cannot be experienced unless there is a subject who experiences it and vice versa. For example, the aroma of freshly brewed coffee cannot be experienced unless there is actual fresh coffee brewing and a consciousness that is able to sense smell within proximity of the coffee. From this we can deduce that consciousness is an essential element of existence. Without any forms of existent consciousnesses, there could be no experience of objective existence

whatsoever. And if objective existence cannot be experienced by anything at all, can it be said to really exist?

4. Cause and effect exist as mutually dependent entities as well. A cause cannot exist as such without an effect, nor can there be an effect without a cause. For instance, a being cannot exist as a parent until they have a child, nor can one exist as a child without having had a parent; an entity cannot exist as a creator until that entity has created something, nor can a creation exist without having had a creator.

5. What this ultimately means is that when all existent phenomena are logically analyzed, they are found to be entirely lacking in any kind of true, independent, inherent self-existence. Everything is therefore said to be empty of inherent existence. Another way of saying this would be, “*Emptiness* is the manner of being that is common to every mode of being.”

The importance of reasoning and logic

1. All of us are born with a capacity to reason. We have greater or lesser capacities for reasoning, and those capacities are utilized to a greater or lesser extent, but in all cases the development of the ability to reason is linked to training. Like any other skill we wish to accomplish, we must gradually train in that skill until we achieve our goal. This is why the Tibetan Buddhist monasteries have developed a system of training in reasoning, logic, the nature of knowledge, and debate.

2. Sentient beings suffer continuously in the prison-like trap of cyclic existence due to the powerful force of ignorance. There is no possibility to escape this revolving entanglement of birth, aging, sickness, and death until we generate within our own continuums the realizations that destroy ignorance. The Buddha said: “*Buddhas neither wash sins away with water, nor remove beings’ sufferings with their hands, nor transfer their realizations to others; beings are freed through the teachings of the truth, the nature of things.*”

3. Buddhas can’t grant liberation to us. Rather, they teach us the nature of phenomena and by that means enable us to escape the suffering of cyclic existence through our own attainment of wisdom. Ignorance is the root cause of suffering, and wisdom is the antidote to ignorance. Learning and wisdom enable us to see the nature of phenomena in the same way that light illuminates a dark room so we can clearly see what’s there. Lati Rinpoche, who served as the 14th Dalai Lama’s spiritual advisor and taught at His Holiness’s personal monastery said, “*There is no phenomenon which cannot be understood. There is no doctrine which, if studied well, cannot be learned, and there is no person who, if he or she studies well, cannot become wise.*”

The purpose of debate

1. There are three main purposes of Tibetan monastic debate: (1) to overcome misconceptions (2) to establish the correct view, and (3) to clear away objections to that view. Great effort is made by the Gelugpa monks to learn the Buddha’s words and fully understand the meaning of the Buddha’s teachings through the process of debate. For those monks who are seeking inner peace and spiritual growth, the sole purpose for study is to put the Buddha’s teachings into practice in order to attain enlightenment. The knowledge to be gained from debate is central to this process. Debate is not merely academic but a way to understand the nature of existence

through the careful analysis of how ordinary phenomena exist. The essential purpose of Buddhist debate is to let go of what is not helpful and arrive at an indisputable understanding of reality. If we are seeking inner peace and spiritual growth; if we wish to put the Buddha's teachings into practice in order to attain enlightenment, we must learn what to focus our attention on, like bees gathering honey, taking only what is essential and leaving the rest.

2. Shantideva took his ordination at the renowned monastic university of Nalanda in northeast India. It was at Nalanda that Buddhist debate came into its own and from there was introduced into Tibetan Buddhism. In this section of the *Wisdom* chapter, Shantideva cuts through misconceptions about the nature of existence, establishes the correct view, and clears away objections to that view.

Refuting the belief in truly independent self-existence

1. [111] *Those who say that both [subject and object] are true, are hard-pressed to maintain their case. If consciousness reveals the truth of things, on what grounds, in its turn, does consciousness exist?* Those philosophers who assert that substantial reality underlies all phenomena, hold the belief that objective phenomena which are experienced and the subjective consciousnesses that experience them, both have truly independent self-existence. This is very difficult to maintain, since it cannot be established by valid, well-grounded, logical reasoning and perception.

2. Substantialist philosophers will of course say that consciousness is established beyond doubt as a truly existing valid awareness. Therefore, the very fact that it observes things as existing is enough to establish that those things do in fact exist. But on what grounds is consciousness itself said to be truly existent? Consciousness, which is by nature subjective, cannot, of itself, establish its own independent self-existence on the ultimate level. Nor is there an entity that could possibly do this. It couldn't be another subjective consciousness. That would result in an infinite regressive series of subjective consciousnesses trying to prove their own objective existence. There could be no proof.

3. [112] *If knowledge objects show that consciousness exists, what is it that shows that they [the objects] exist? If both subsist through mutual dependence, both will thereby lose their true existence.* Perhaps it could be argued that the independent self-existence of the consciousness is proven by the fact that it experiences the perception of independently self-existent objects. But then what proof is there of an independently self-existent object? Is that somehow proven by the consciousness's experience of it? If the object and consciousness both are needed to prove the existence of each other, then obviously the two are without independent self-existence; it is impossible to use either the object or consciousness as proof of the independent self-existence of the other.

Compiled and edited by Tenzin Dhondup Sherab/Christopher Moroney