

TIBETAN BUDDHISM CENTER FOR WORLD PEACE
San Antonio, Texas

Shāntideva's *Bodhicharyāvatāra*, The Way of the Bodhisattva
Chapter 9: "Wisdom"
Part 9.2: The Nature of Existence—Consciousness & God

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 30: Sunday, December 3, 2023

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

Review of Session 29

1. In the previous session we began our discussion on the nature of existence with the subject of *dependent arising*—the manner of being that is common to every mode of existence. All existing events, objects, and entities that can be observed and experienced arise in dependence on multiple causes and conditions. For example, all functioning phenomena necessarily depend upon impermanence, which enables them to change or move, thereby giving them the capacity to either have an effect on, or be affected by, other phenomena. Phenomena also exist in dependence on relativity. For example, 'tall' exists only in relation to 'short', 'near' exists only in relation to 'far', and so on. Subject and object are co-dependent or mutually dependent. An object cannot be observed or experienced unless there is a subject that can observe and experience it and vice versa. Cause and effect exist as mutually dependent entities as well: a cause cannot exist as such without an effect, nor can an effect exist as such without a cause. Because of the ubiquitous nature of dependent arising, all phenomena are found to be entirely lacking in any kind of truly inherent, independent self-existence. That is the reason why all existing events, objects, and entities that can be observed or experienced are said by the Buddha to be 'empty' of inherent existence.

2. We also discussed the importance of reasoning and logic in removing suffering. Since the root cause of all suffering is the ignorance which holds an incorrect view of the nature of existence, the wisdom that realizes the true nature of existence through a process of reasoning, logic, and meditative concentration is the ultimate antidote that counteracts suffering and its causes. The knowledge to be gained from Buddhist debate is central to this process. Debate is a way to understand the nature of existence through the careful analysis of how ordinary phenomena exist. The purpose of Buddhist debate is (1) to overcome misconceptions, (2) to establish the correct view, and (3) to clear away objections to that view. If we can do this, we'll be able to let go of what is not helpful and arrive at an understanding of reality that is

undeniable. Shantideva uses the technique of debate throughout this section to help us focus our attention on taking only what is essential to our practice of compassion and wisdom and leaving the rest.

3. We concluded the previous session by talking about the relationship between consciousness and objects of consciousness, or to put it another way, the relationship between subject and object. It is a topic which plays a key role in the attainment of enlightenment. As was said before, subject and object are mutually dependent. All conscious awarenesses of internal and external existence—whether they be through the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, or mental consciousnesses—are by nature subjective. They can only arise in dependence upon an object of awareness, such as a sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, or mental activity. If there is no object of awareness present, consciousness does not arise. Likewise, objects are not observed or experienced if there are no consciousnesses to observe or experience them. Both conscious awarenesses and objects of conscious awarenesses are needed to establish and confirm the existence of one another. We now continue with the text.

Refuting the belief in truly independent self-existence (continued)

1. [113] *If, without a son, a man cannot be father, whence, indeed, will such a son arise? There is no father in the absence of a son. Just so, the mind and object have no true existence.* Conscious awarenesses and objects of conscious awarenesses are established in mutual dependence upon one another. In this way it is clear that they have no truly independent self-existence. ‘Long’ is established in dependence upon ‘short’ and ‘short’ is established in dependence on ‘long’. The far mountain is established only in dependence on its relation to the near mountain, and so on.

2. Similarly, if a man has no child he cannot be established as a father, and without a father there can be no child that is born. Thus father and child are mutually dependent phenomena and have no true, independent self-existence. Likewise consciousnesses are only established as such in dependence upon their having objects to be conscious of, and objects of consciousnesses are only established as such in dependence upon consciousnesses being aware of them. Therefore, consciousness and objects of consciousness are mutually dependent phenomena and have no true, independent self-existence at all. Because of this, Buddhism asserts 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?

3. Proponents of substantialism maintain that underlying all phenomena there exist substantial realities, or real substances, whether they be mental or material. In the following stanza the substantialists object to Shantideva’s position that phenomena have no independent existence. [114] Substantialist objection: *“The plant arises from the seed, and through it is the seed deduced. It’s just the same with consciousness arising from its object. How can it fail to show the thing’s existence?”* The substantialist argues that because a truly existent plant arises from a seed, it is a perfect indication that the seed also truly exists. Similarly, because a truly existent consciousness arises from an object of consciousness, isn’t that the perfect indication that proves the true existence of the object?

4. This is a major argument of those who assert the substantial reality of all phenomena: The world about us must truly exist the way it appears to us, otherwise we wouldn't share common experiences of it, right? Our experiential awareness of the world arises in dependence upon an independent, objective world that truly exists out there, doesn't it? This conclusion seems inescapable if one has not deeply explored the role of consciousness in the universe. Until now Western science has largely made an assumption that the the cosmos has an objective existence that is independent of consciousness.

5. However, Western science is now rethinking its assumptions regarding the role of consciousness within the complex structure of the cosmos. In a *Scientific American* article by Dan Falk entitled "Is Consciousness Part of the Fabric of the Universe" (dated September 25, 2023), he describes how some members of the current scientific and philosophical community are gaining renewed interest in ancient philosophical and scientific theories that describe consciousness as being a fundamental aspect of reality. The Buddha, of course, asserted this. Plato also took this idea seriously. Over 400 years ago Galileo, who is often hailed as the father of modern science, recognized that not everything could be explained using precise scientific methods of measurement and mathematics. In a statement he made that closely echoes the Chittamatra and Prasangika Madhymika Buddhist philosophical views, Galileo said that such things as colors, tastes, and smells "are no more than mere names for they reside only in consciousness." He posited that these qualities aren't really out there in the world, but exist only in the consciousnesses of the creatures that perceive them. "Hence," Galileo said, "if the living creatures were removed, all these qualities would be wiped away and annihilated."

6. In September 2023, a group of roughly two dozen scholars, scientists, and philosophers gathered to debate the "hard problem" of how and why humans and other organisms have subjective experiences. A two-day workshop was held at Marist College in Poughkeepsie, N.Y. in which they explored the possibility that consciousness is an essential component of the universe and a fundamental aspect of reality. Part of the appeal of the idea that consciousness has been here all along, existing within the fabric of the universe, is that scientists will no longer need to worry about the question of how consciousness could arise from inanimate matter. Australian philosopher and cognitive scientist David Chalmers has even suggested that individual particles might be somehow aware. He said in a TED Talk that a photon "might have some element of raw, subjective feeling, some primitive precursor to consciousness." American neuroscientist Christof Koch is also on board with this idea. He says that if one accepts consciousness as a real phenomenon that is not dependent on any particular material then "it is a simple step to conclude that the entire cosmos is suffused with sentience."

7. However, according to Buddhism, consciousness and objects of consciousness, although different from one another, are not truly independent, self-existent entities. They are mutually co-dependent, relying on one another for their existence as the essential components of a universal subject-object relationship. Going back to the substantialist argument concerning the plant and the seed, Shantideva responds: [115] *A consciousness that's different from the plant itself deduces the existence of the seed. But what will show that consciousness exists, whereby the object is itself established?* Shantideva is saying that it is our conscious mind, which is different from the plant, that deduces or infers the plant did not come into existence independently but was preceded by the existence of a seed. Consciousness does this by

examining the cause-and-effect relationship between seeds and plants, which is indicative of the basic principle that all things arise in dependence upon other things. However, if a cause-and-effect relationship had not been previously examined and determined by the conscious mind, the existence of the seed would not be revealed simply by observing the plant. In such a case it could appear as if the plant did not have a cause but came into existence merely from its own nature. Given that, what is it that can prove or disprove the real existence of the *consciousness*—the very thing that is the means by which the existence of the cause-and-effect relationship between the plant and seed is determined? Ultimately, the independent existence of a consciousness, which is subjective in nature and therefore dependently arises, cannot be established by that consciousness itself, nor can it be established by another subjective consciousness. It is the *relationship* between subjective consciousness and objective existence that proves the existence of both. Neither can be shown to truly exist independently of the other.

Proofs of emptiness: the absence of true existence

1. The ancient Charvaka school of Indian materialism is considered as one of the atheist schools in the Hindu tradition. The Charvakas hold that direct perception, sensory experience, and inference based on direct perception are the proper sources of knowledge. They embrace skepticism and reject ritualism. The Charvakas claim that such things as the rising of the sun, the flowing of water downhill, the roundness of peas, the sharpness of thorns, the colors on the tail feathers of a peacock, and the smoothness of the stem of the lotus flower are not produced from various causes but simply arise from their own nature. Taking these things as examples, they assert that things have no cause but come into existence merely from their own nature. The Prasangika school which Shantideva is a proponent of clearly disagrees with the Charvaka view.

2. [116] Shantideva: *In everyday perception there's a cause for everything. The different segments of the lotus flower arise from a variety of causes.* Shantideva says it is a matter of everyday perception that all results are seen to be produced by causes; it is impossible to find something that is uncaused. For example, the individual parts of a lotus are produced by a variety of individual causes. In the same way it can be inferred that the rising of the sun, the flowing of water downhill and so forth are also produced from a variety of different causes.

3. [117] Charvakas: *"But what gives rise to such variety of causes?"* Shantideva: *An even earlier variety of causes, we declare.* Charvakas: *"And how do causes give their fruits?"* Shantideva: *Through power of preceding causes.* Shantideva is saying that each cause is created due to the individual preceding conditions for that cause. How is a distinct cause able to produce a distinct result; for instance, what is the specific cause for the sharpness of a thorn or the color in a tail feather of a peacock? The ability of distinct causes to produce various distinct results is due to the power of each one's preceding cause. Buddhism very clearly asserts the importance of cause-and-effect relationships in the occurrence of both physical and mental natural events. Consciousness is considered to be as much a component of the universe as matter or space; and cause-and-effect relationships are equally relevant to mental and physical events as well as to the interactions between consciousness and matter.

Is God the cause of everything that exists?

1. Shantideva now raises the topic of God, using the Hindu God Ishvara as an example. "Ishvara" is a concept in Hinduism with a wide range of meanings that depend on the way in

which a particular school of Hinduism uses the term and in what era they use it. In India during the medieval era of Shantideva's time, Ishvara could mean, among other things, God, Supreme Being, personal God, or special Self (as in Atman). Ishvara could also be synonymous with Vishnu, or could be one of Hinduism's pantheistic deities.

2. [118] Shantideva: *If Ishvara is held to be the cause of beings, you must now define for us his nature. If, by this, you simply mean the elements, no need to tie ourselves disputing names!* Shantideva begins this stanza addressing the issue concerning which version of Ishvara will be used for the purpose of this argument. If the name Ishvara refers to a God that is the creator of beings, then the nature of this creator must be specifically defined. If Ishvara's nature is defined in terms of pantheism, meaning a being who is identical to the universe and cosmos, who is inherent in all things, animate and inanimate, who is still expanding and creating, has existed since the beginning of time, and who is equivalent to the elements of nature, Shantideva would agree with that. There is no fault in maintaining that living beings and the environment arise from the elements that make up the universe. What the Hindus call "God" in this case, the Buddhists refer to as the elements of the universe. Shantideva is saying there's no need to get our knickers in a knot over questions of mere terminology! It's worth remembering that Shantideva's critique here is not directed at the beliefs of the three monotheistic religions of Semitic origin, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, to which only some of his arguments are relevant.

3. In the next stanza, Shantideva adds theism to the debate. Theism is in sharp contrast to the pantheism of the previous stanza which equates God with the entirety of existence. Theism asserts that God is eternal, one, and worthy of veneration, whereas the world is quite distinct from its creator. However, theists acknowledge the involvement of God in the world and in human life. They believe that God sustains a personal relationship with creatures and that God has absolute power and immutable permanence. [119] Theists: *Yet earth and other elements are many, impermanent, inert, without divinity. Trampled underfoot, they are impure, and thus they cannot be a God Omnipotent.* The theists believe that the elements of the universe are many, impermanent, lacking a conscious ability to arrange themselves, and are not divine. Elements such as earth and water are stepped upon and are impure. Thus, they cannot be a sacred God.

4. [120] Shantideva: *The Deity cannot be space—inert and unproductive. He cannot be the self, for this we have refuted. He's inconceivable, they say—then likewise his creatorship [is inconceivable]. Is there any point, therefore, to such a claim?* Perhaps the theists will say that God is space, but space cannot be regarded as God the Creator, because space is incapable of moving or acting, of giving help or harm; it is unable to produce anything. Space is devoid of any kind of action, and thus it is not God. A permanent self, or soul, is not God, for the valid existence of a permanent, unchangeable self has already been shown to be erroneous. The theists argue that God is inconceivable by ordinary people, but that is of no help. If God is utterly incomprehensible, who is it that can verify God as the Creator?

5. [121] Shantideva: *What is it that he wishes to create? Has he made the self and all the elements? But are not self and elements and he himself eternal? And consciousness, we know, arises from its object.* What is it that God wishes to create? The soul, the self, and all the

elements of the universe? But if, as the theists say, God is inconceivable and therefore beyond our understanding, how can we possibly know what it is that God wills? It is by knowing both the “creator” and the “created” that the causal relationship between them can be discovered and expressed. If God the Creator is eternal and unchangeable, what is the nature of God’s creations? Would it not follow that they must be eternal and unchangeable as well?

6. According to Buddhism, no new continuums of consciousness are ever created. The mental continuum of every sentient being traces back to time without beginning. A wide variety of life forms are taken on by each consciousness in diverse physical realms of existence. A sentient being may even dwell in formless realms which are unaffected by the cycles of cosmic origination and destruction. Moreover, while one cosmos is undergoing total destruction, making it unfit for any type of life in bodily form, others are being born, while still others are abiding in a habitable state. Buddhist cosmology asserts the existence of countless worlds inhabited by countless sentient beings including humans, animals and a myriad of other life forms.

7. [122] Shantideva: *Pain and pleasure have from all time, sprung from karma, so tell us, what has his Divinity produced? And if there’s no beginning in the cause, how can there be beginnings in its fruits?* Pain and pleasure, joy and sorrow, all occur as a result of actions that are committed with wholesome and unwholesome states of mind. According to Buddhism, the production, transformation and destruction of all natural phenomena can be understood without resorting to the hypotheses of a Creator God.

8. Concerning this point, B. Alan Wallace, in his annotation to His Holiness the Dalai Lama’s commentary, writes the following: *In his paper entitled “Science and Religion” Albert Einstein declares: “The main source of the present-day conflicts between the spheres of religion and science lies in this concept of a personal God.” Buddhism denies the existence of a Creator God, since it attributes the creation of the world to natural events rather than to a source beyond nature. It is essential to keep in mind, however, that by “natural events” Buddhism includes many phenomena, including consciousness, which Western science normally excludes from the natural world.*

9. If one believes that God is a permanent, unchangeable, eternal cause having no beginning, how could there be a beginning to the effects of that cause? Again, B. Alan Wallace writes: *The notion that the universe and all the sentient beings who dwell in it have no ultimate beginning is often hard to grasp by the Western mind. Although the distortions and obscurations of an individual stream of consciousness have no beginning, they are irrevocably dispelled upon full awakening [to enlightenment]. The conscious continuum of a Buddha then continues on to an endless future; and the limitless activities of a Buddha focus entirely on leading others to spiritual awakening. Western thinkers are often accustomed to thinking in terms of ultimate beginnings, and both in the spheres of religion and science they are admonished not to ask what happened prior to such beginnings. Buddhism denies any beginning to time, and it refutes the existence of a Creator existing outside of time on the grounds that there is no verifying cognition of either.*

10. [123] Shantideva: *Why are creatures not created constantly, for Ishvara relies on nothing but himself? And if there's nothing that he has not made, what remains on which he might depend?* Since God is believed to be immutable—not capable of or susceptible to change—whatever God produces should be produced always without change. Why then, are all the effects of God not created simultaneously at all times? If there is nothing that is not produced by God, God could not be influenced by any other conditions that might arise. God would be responsible for everything that occurs. But even if God did in fact depend on various cooperative conditions, why aren't these conditions entirely present all the time? If it is true that there is nothing that God has not made, it is impossible to claim that what God creates depends also on some cause other than himself.

11. [124] *If Ishvara depends* [i.e. if God is dependent], *the cause of all is but the meeting of conditions and Ishvara. When these obtain* [exist], *he cannot but create; when these are absent, he is powerless to make.* If God did depend upon other substantial causes and circumstantial conditions in order to produce creation, then the main cause for the creation would become those other substantial causes and circumstantial conditions and not God. In this case how could it be said that it is God who produces all living creatures and the worlds in which they live? This would mean in effect that when the causes and conditions were present, God could not but bring forth the effects, and when the causes and conditions did not come together, God would be powerless to create. In this case God would become an other-powered, non-autonomous being.

12. [125] *If Almighty God does not intend, but yet creates, another thing has forced him. If he wishes to create, he's swayed by his desire. So even though Creator, what of his omnipotence?* God can have no wish to produce the effect of suffering; this is something produced by our own actions. But if this is so then one can no longer maintain that God is the creator of all possible effects. If God is the creator of all possible effects, one would have to maintain that God is responsible for the unsought suffering of creatures. And if all effects were wished for by God, then it follows that creation depends upon the wish and desire of God. Wishes and desires are impermanent, because desires arise prior to action and cease upon the completion of the desired action. This would seem to indicate that creation is not produced by a permanent, unchangeable God, but by impermanent wishes and desires. Therefore, the belief in an immutable, unchangeable God is unfounded. In that case, how could one say that God is the cause of everything that exists?

13. The path to freedom from suffering involves not only love and compassion, but the use of reason to form logical conclusions, inferences, and arguments based on factual knowledge or evidence. To stop the suffering of cyclic existence for ourselves and others we must overcome our ignorance. Until now we have passively accepted normal appearances and conceptions and have consequently been unwittingly drawn into contaminated actions and afflictions which inevitably lead to suffering for ourselves and others. One of the principal weapons to be used in the battle against the ignorance which obscures the true nature of existence is reason.

Compiled and edited by Tenzin Dhondup Sherab/Christopher Moroney