

TIBETAN BUDDHISM CENTER FOR WORLD PEACE
San Antonio, Texas

Shāntideva's *Bodhicharyāvatāra*, The Way of the Bodhisattva
Chapter 9: "Wisdom"
Part 10: Karma & Emptiness

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, Ven. Passang Gelek, Geshe Lhundup Sopa, Jeffrey Hopkins, Guy Newland, Alexander Berzin, and the guidance of Geshe Lobsang Nima.

TBCWP Session 32: Sunday, December 17, 2023

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

Summary of Session 31 and the refutation of self-production

1. [141] *Therefore, as we see through such investigation, nothing is that does not have a cause; and nothing is existent in its causes taken by one or in the aggregate.* As we have seen through the reasons and analyses given in the previous two sessions, Shantideva has established that there is no such thing as self-production that is causeless, and neither an eternal God nor an eternal primal substance is the creator of the cosmos and the sentient beings that inhabit it. Whether phenomena are animate or inanimate, they arise in dependence upon a beginningless series of causes and conditions. There can be no effect that coexists inherently within its cause, whether that cause appears to be a single thing, or an aggregation of things.

2. For example, the substantial cause of a sprout is a seed because the seed is the substance that actually transforms into the sprout itself. The circumstantial conditions that help the seed to sprout are heat, water, fertilizer, earth and so on. Without the circumstantial conditions, the seed will not produce a sprout. The resulting sprout does not exist in the seed, the water, the earth or the fertilizer either individually or collectively. In the same way, all phenomena are produced in dependence upon these two things: causes and conditions.

3. [142] *It does not come from somewhere else, neither does it stay nor yet depart. How will what confusion takes for truth in any sense be different from a mirage?* An effect is not present in any one of its causes or conditions, nor does it exist in all of them together. It does not remain fixed and permanent upon having been produced; and when it ceases to exist, it does not go somewhere else.

4. The confusion that occurs when we grasp onto true existence causes us to falsely attribute an inherently independent existence to entities. Whether we attribute that independent existence to the causes, or nature, or effects of an entity, in fact they all exist only through the

power of conventionally agreed upon conceptual designations, or labels. But things don't appear to us as if they exist that way—in our confusion they appear to us as if they truly exist from their own side, independently and separately from everything else. Consequently, the way objects appear to us are not the way they actually exist, and in that sense they are like mirages or illusions.

The argument for interdependence

1. [143] *Things, then, bodied forth by magic spells, and that which is displayed by dint [power] of causes—whence have these arisen? we should ask; and where they go to, that we should examine!* We should deeply investigate and examine whatever are produced through the force of causes and compare them with illusions that are conjured by a magician. Where do they come from when they arise? Where do they go when they cease? The point of this is to see that nothing is truly created, abides, or ceases. All phenomena are like illusions in that they exist in a dependent fashion—there is nothing whatsoever, in any way, shape, or form, that exists independently. Upon analysis it is found that when something is produced it does not come from anywhere else and when it ceases it does not go to some other place.

2. [144] *What is seen when circumstances meet and is not seen in absence of the same is not real; it is like an image in a mirror. How can true existence be ascribed to it?* We can see that effects arise from causes and that without causes there can be no effects. Therefore an effect does not exist independently; neither does a cause. Its own existence is dependent upon something else; it does not exist on its own. In addition, it exists in dependence upon its component parts. There isn't anything that exists on its own, independently of its parts or attributes; and when the individual parts are analyzed, no whole can be found at all.

3. As was said before, the only way entities exist is through the power of conventionally agreed upon conceptual designations or labels. The basis upon which an object is designated and the object that is designated upon that basis are never identical. For example, the pieces of woven cloth that serve as the basis upon which a "pair of socks" is designated, and the "pair of socks" that are designated upon those pieces of woven cloth are not identical. The "pair of socks" is merely a conceptual label that is designated by the observer, or the designator, and can never be found among the components of woven cloth that are its basis of designation. Since the object, the "pair of socks", doesn't exist from its own side, it exists simply by the power of conceptual designation, or labeling, and agreed upon convention.

4. There is nothing that exists independently, by its own essential nature or identity. Therefore everything is imputed and artificial, like a reflection in a mirror that is falsely imagined to be the thing it reflects. How can anything truly exist in reality? This is the argument for interdependence: Since things exist in reliance upon causes and conditions—in dependence upon other things—how can they be truly existent in and of themselves? They are like reflections in a mirror that depend upon something else for their appearance to arise.

A closer look at karma: causation and production

1. [145] *What need is there for cause in something that's already real? But then, what need is there for cause in something that does not exist?* If something was truly, independently self-existent, it wouldn't need a cause to produce it. And if something simply didn't exist at all, again,

there would be no need for a cause to produce it. In general, things that exist are produced, and things that don't exist are not produced. However, when we make the statement that things are produced, if we mean that they exist not simply by the power of conventional agreement and conceptual designation, but by their own power, then we would be saying that they exist independently without having to rely upon other conditions. If something existed in that way, it wouldn't need a cause, because it would already exist through its own power. On the other hand, if it's impossible for an independently self-existent phenomenon to actually exist, what good would causes do for it?

2. [146] *Even through a hundred million causes, no change takes place in nonexistent things, for in that state of 'non-thing', how could 'things' occur? And into what could nonexistent things transform?* Even a hundred million causes are not able to make something that is inherently nonexistent become inherently existent. If a nonexistent thing were to become an existent thing, it would have to do so either (1) while maintaining its condition of nonexistence or (2) after having discarded its condition of nonexistence. In the latter case, since existence and nonexistence are mutually exclusive, how could it discard its nonexistence and take up its existence? That would be impossible. In the former case, how could a nonexistent thing maintain its state and somehow change into an existent thing? Again it would be an impossibility for a nonexistent thing—*meaning an independently self-existing thing*—to transform into anything at all.

3. [147] *Since things cannot become when they are nonexistent, when could such existent things occur? For insofar as entities do not arise, nonentities themselves will not depart.* Basically, a nonexistent thing amounts to nothing. Nothing comes from nothing. When could something ever come from nothing? Insofar as nothing arises from nonexistent things—i.e. independently existing things—nonexistent things themselves can never be other than what they are: *nothing at all*.

4. [148] *And if nonentity is not dispersed, no chance is there for entity to manifest. And entity cannot be changed into nonentity, for otherwise it has a double nature.* Since the two states of existence and nonexistence are mutually exclusive, unless something can escape from nonexistence, it is impossible for its existence to emerge. And a truly existing entity cannot become nonexistent, because if it did it would follow that one entity would have two mutually exclusive natures, and that is impossible.

5. [149] *Thus there are no entities and likewise there's no ceasing of the same. And therefore beings, each and every one, are without origin and never cease.* Just as there is no true, independently existing production of things, so there is no true, independently existing cessation. Therefore, living beings are not truly born, nor do they truly cease. The entire universe as well, which continually arises and passes simply by the power of convention and the mutually codependent interplay between subjective consciousness and objective existence, is devoid and empty of inherent production, duration, and cessation.

6. [150] *Wandering beings, thus, resemble dreams, and also the banana tree, if you examine well. In ultimate reality there's no distinguishing between the states of sorrow and beyond all sorrow.* Like a dream, if we analyze states of living and being, they are seen to be devoid of an

intrinsic essence, like a plantain tree. From the outside, a plantain tree looks firm and solid, but when it's cut into, one finds that it has no core. Its appearance misrepresents its reality. In the same way, liberation and cyclic existence are devoid of an intrinsic nature, and in terms of ultimate reality there is no distinction between them. Ultimately, there is no difference between attaining nirvana and not attaining it, because where there is no truly existing bondage in samsara, there is no truly existing liberation from it. The state of nirvana that is free from suffering and the state of cyclic existence that is bound to suffering are the same in that they both are completely empty of any truly independent self-existence. *In this respect* they are identical—there isn't the slightest bit of difference between them.

Encouragement to strive to realize emptiness

1. [151] *With things that in this way are empty what is there to pay me court and honors, and who is there to scorn and to revile me?* All entities—whether they be the individuals who are in cyclic existence, the physical dangers and emotional suffering of cyclic existence, or the attainment of liberation from cyclic existence (a.k.a. nirvana)—are empty of an intrinsic nature. Therefore, what is there that can actually be gained or lost? When praise and blame are analyzed, they are found to have no true existence.

2. [152] *Pleasure, sorrow—whence do these arise? What is there to give me joy and pain? And if I search their very suchness, who is craving? What is craved?* Where does pleasure and sorrow come from? How do these subjective feelings of ours arise? Are there self-existent things out there called 'pleasure' and 'pain'? If we analyze this subject-object relationship in terms of ultimate reality, we first need to ask: who is the agent or actor that feels pleasure and pain, what is the action or process that occurs in feeling pleasure and pain, and what is the object or thing that gives rise to our feelings of pleasure and pain? None of the three parts of this relationship have any independent identity. The same can be said for the other worldly concerns of gain and loss, good and bad reputation, and praise and blame.

3. The triad of agent, action, and object is a frequent subject of analysis in the Madhyamaka (Middle Way) system. If we talk about this triad in terms of scientific research, we could say there is a person who makes a measurement (agent), there is a system of measuring (action), and there is something being measured (object). All three are mutually interdependent, and none of them have an independent identity. However, if the agent or person in this triad who makes the measurement reifies their *own* identity and believes they have an independent self-existence, they will definitely have a tendency to reify the act of measuring and the measured object as well. In other words, there will be a tendency to think that each part of this triad has an independent identity. From the Madhyamika point of view, this guarantees that such scientific research will be conducted under a cloud of confusion regarding the nature of how things exist and how they relate to one another.

5. [153] *Examine now this world of living beings: who is there therein to pass away? What is there to come, and what has been? And who, indeed, are relatives and friends?* When we examine the nature of living beings in this world and find they have no real independent self-existence—even moment to moment—who is it, then, that can be said to live here and who is it that dies? Who will ever be born in the next life, and who was ever born in the past?

6. [154] *May beings like myself discern and grasp that all things have the character of space! But those who seek their happiness and ease, through dispute or enjoyments, [155] all are deeply troubled, or else thrilled with joy.* All phenomena are like space. When we observe and analyze phenomena we find them to be not self-sufficient and they don't have any inherent identity. His Holiness the Dalai Lama says our initial understanding of emptiness won't immediately weaken our attachment and hostility; but by repeatedly familiarizing ourselves with that understanding, we'll gradually come closer to an actual realization of emptiness. In that process, the dualistic appearance of subject and object fades away, culminating in a non-conceptual realization of ultimate reality. That acts as a direct remedy for our mental distortions of reality that are based on conjecture, theories, and inconclusive evidence.

7. These speculative mental distortions are acquired by adopting false views. False views have to be *learned*. Inborn mental distortions are ones that we're born with. As newborn infants we come into this world with mental obscurations carried over from our previous lives; and these can then be compounded with speculative distortions that we adopt during our lifetime. Buddhist practice doesn't aim at reverting to an infant-like state of consciousness, but at striving toward an unprecedented state of awakening. Inborn mental distortions are finally dispelled only as we develop on the Path of Meditation. Broadly speaking, there are five pathways of consciousness a Bodhisattva develops to achieve enlightenment: Path of Accumulation, Path of Preparation, Path of Seeing, Path of Meditation, and Path of No More Learning.

8. His Holiness says it is difficult. Simply knowing the meaning of emptiness doesn't suddenly free us from mental distortions. But by repeatedly broadening our understanding of emptiness, analyzing it and familiarizing ourselves with it, mental distortions and misunderstandings will gradually be dispelled.

The disadvantages of not realizing emptiness

9. [155 cont.] *They suffer, strive, contend among themselves, slashing, stabbing, injuring each other: they live their lives engulfed in evil and travail.* Now Shantideva talks about the disadvantages of not realizing emptiness. Those of us who don't have a realization of emptiness can become filled with anger when we're confronted with sources of conflict and become delighted when we meet with sources of joy. If our desires aren't met, we become frustrated, unhappy, furious, depressed, or miserable; and to avoid that we'll strive unceasingly to get what we desire, competing with one another, arguing with one another, attacking and even physically harming or killing each other. Through such afflictive emotions and actions we make a mess of our lives and relationships and engulf ourselves in negativity.

10. The great master Atisha said that when emptiness is realized, all misdeeds and immorality will come to an end and great compassion will arise. Emptiness possesses the essence of compassion, so when emptiness is realized great compassion manifests effortlessly. We ordinary beings don't realize that phenomena are empty and that the nature of their being is beyond all conceptuality. So we think what is unreal is real: we attribute existence to what is nonexistent and think a self exists where there isn't one to be found. This is where our delusion lies. We long for happiness, but we don't know how to get it. We struggle against everything that seems hostile to us, and love and cling to what appears to be friendly.

11. [156] *From time to time they surface in the states of bliss, abandoning themselves to many pleasures. But dying, down they fall to suffer torment, long, unbearable, in realms of sorrow.* Through the kindness of our teachers, the Buddhas, and the Bodhisattvas, we occasionally perform virtuous actions such as observing vows and precepts. Because of this, we're fortunate in our rebirths, cycling again and again in many states of high rebirth in various universes. And in these fortunate states we enjoy many worldly pleasures and comforts, making the assumption that our experiences will always be this way. But because we fail to practice virtue consistently and commit non-virtuous actions out of ignorance, desire, and anger, at death we fall into lower rebirths where we can experience various types of suffering, possibly for a long time. High and low, through states of joy and sorrow—these are the wanderings of sentient beings.

12. [157] *Many are the chasms and abysses of existence, where the truth of suchness is not found. All is contradiction, all denial; suchness in this world is not like this.* There are many states of existence within the realms of samsara, where no learning and understanding of the nature of reality—the means of liberation—can be found. Instead, because of intense craving and clinging to self and the true existence of phenomena, beings become bound to these unfortunate cycles of existence.

13. [158] *Here, exceeding all description, is the shoreless sea of pain unbearable. Here it is that strength is low, and lives are flickering and brief.* In cyclic existence, there are many types of suffering and unfortunate circumstances to be experienced, and when we're caught up in these experiences it becomes very difficult to engage in wholesome and beneficial activity.

14. [159] *All activities for sake of life and health, relief of hunger and of weariness, time consumed in sleep, all accident and injury, and sterile friendships with the childish.* All of our activities are centered around seeking a long and healthy life, having enough to eat, being weary from the tedious nature of our jobs, fatigued from lack of sleep, dealing with calamities that occur to us and our family, and having meaningless associations with people who, like us, are running after experiences that feed our craving and desire for more things that we think will make us happy, but actually don't in the end.

15. [160] *Thus life passes quickly, meaningless. True discernment—hard it is to have! How therefore shall we ever find the means to curb the futile wanderings of the mind?* In this way, life passes by swiftly without us having achieved the level of happiness we were seeking, and with very little opportunity for investigating the nature of phenomena. Even if we have an inclination toward spirituality, because of our habituation to distraction, it doesn't tend to be sustained, or go very deep. It is difficult to correct this. How can we ever find the means to prevent habitual distraction?

16. [161] *Further, evil forces work and strain to cast us down into the states of woe; manifold are false, deceptive trails, and it is hard to dissipate our doubts.* A lot of harm is brought about by negative forces that are powerful, malicious, and deceptive, and which obstruct our spiritual practice. There are many false paths in this world that only lead to suffering. For instance, there are extreme views such as nihilism, a philosophy which maintains that nothing actually exists or has meaning; there is also agnosticism, which holds the view that any ultimate reality is unknown and is probably unknowable.

17. [163] *Alas indeed that living beings, carried on the flood of bitter pain, however terrible their plight may be, do not perceive they suffer so!* The real pity is that those of us who continue to remain in limitless suffering don't recognize our own state of existence, our own discontent. Instead, we sentient beings mistake suffering for happiness, and continue to strive for and grasp at the very things that keep us trapped in cyclic existence.

18. [164] *They are like those who bathe themselves repeatedly and then proceed to scorch themselves with fire. They suffer greatly in this way, yet there they stay, proclaiming loud their bliss.* Sentient beings who are caught in cyclic existence are like those people who perform ritual cleansing of the body followed by entering fire. Although they are in a state of misery, they think they are in a fine condition.

19. [165] *Likewise there are some who live and act as though old age and death will never come to them. But first they're slain and then there comes the dreadful fall into the states of loss.* Those who pretend to be carefree, clinging to worldly activities as being the only real happiness there is, act as though they were liberated beings, and that old age and death will never come to them. But death is certain; it will come. And when it does, they will fall back into the suffering of cyclic existence that is born of ignorance, attachment, and aversion, desperately clinging to a truly existing 'I' living in a world of truly existing phenomena.

Encouragement to stay on the Bodhisattva path to enlightenment

20. [166] *When shall I be able to allay and quench the dreadful heat of suffering's blazing fires with plenteous rains of my own bliss that pour torrential from my clouds of merit?* We should remember that all sentient beings have suffered, and continue to suffer, unbearable pains, similar to being tormented with flames of fire. We should hold the thought that any merit we have gained through our study and practice of the Bodhisattva path are like clouds that pour generous rains of happiness to extinguish these fires of suffering. Imagine how wonderful it would be to actually alleviate others' suffering. Then think, "I will do this. I will act to relieve the suffering of all beings." Meditate continuously with pure intention on this natural thought of great compassion.

21. [167] *My wealth of merit gathered in, with reverence but without conceptual target, when shall I reveal this truth of emptiness to those who go to ruin through belief in real existence?* In addition to accumulating a collection of merit arising from infinite beneficial deeds of generosity, ethics, patience, courageous effort, and meditative concentration, we should accumulate a collection of wisdom arising from the realization that all phenomena are empty of an independent self-existence. With the unification of our practice of wisdom that realizes emptiness and our practice of beneficial action motivated by compassion for sentient beings, may we become fully awakened, and may we reveal the infallible view of emptiness to those limitless sentient beings who are afflicted by the grasping and clinging to a false and mistaken sense of true existence.

22. The wish to attain enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings, with the spontaneous thought to free them from their suffering and lead them to ultimate happiness, is to have the mind of bodhicitta. The methods for developing bodhicitta, as well as all the essentials

of the Mahayana path, have been explained by Shantideva in the previous chapters. The correct view of reality is presented in this ninth chapter, the development of meditative concentration in the eighth chapter, and the conduct of a Bodhisattva in the earlier chapters. It has been said that through the proper union of compassion and wisdom, we will be able to attain the state of full enlightenment very rapidly. Therefore, we should take these teachings as personal advice and incorporate them without delay into our daily practice of the Bodhisattva path for the benefit of all without exception.

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