

Shantideva's Bodhisattvacharyavatara

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

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As usual let us spend some time in meditation.

(Pause for meditation)

Now, generate the bodhicitta motivation for receiving the teachings.

2.1.2. Refuting objections of no-need and no ability regarding emptiness

2.1.2.2. DEFENDING ONE'S POSITION

2.1.2.2.1. Refuting Realists such as the Sautrantika in general

2.1.2.2.1.2. Refuting harm through quotations

2.1.2.2.1.2.3. Refuting that one is in contradiction

2.1.2.2.1.2.3.1. Refuting that they are not even established as illusory

The last line of the earlier verse and the first line of the next verse is presented.

7d. If said to be contradictory even with the illusory;

8a. The yogis are not at fault in the illusory

The commentary first presents the argument of the opponent:

Argument: Even on the illusory level, it would be contradictory for compounded phenomena to be impermanent because in the world functionality in the morning is renowned to also exist permanently in the evening. There is no contradiction ...

The **Sautrantikas'** argument here is that, besides impermanence being doubtful in an ultimate sense, even at an illusory or conventional level, it would be contradictory for compounded phenomena to be impermanent. The reason presented here for that argument is *because in the world functionality in the morning is renowned to also exist permanently in the evening*. This is indeed how we normally think. For example, when we meet someone again we think, 'This is the same person I saw earlier'. And when we refer to things, we treat the thing that we perceive now as the same thing that we saw earlier.

Normally, if we meet someone later in the day after having seen them that morning, we would say, 'I saw you this morning'. This means that we perceive and believe that the person we see now has not changed in any way from the person we saw in the morning. We make these comments because our perception is that nothing has really changed. But on the subtler level of impermanence, things are changing moment by moment. From the point of view of subtle impermanence, we are seeing someone newly and fresh at every moment, thus you are not seeing the same person you saw in the morning. The person you saw in the morning has already ceased and what you are seeing now is a new continuum of the person.

This reminds me, on an occasion of a visit I made to Geshe Loden's centre, one official guest – who was not a Buddhist – came up to me and said, 'I saw you last year and you were very jovial and happy. And this year I see you again, and you haven't changed a bit. You are the same jovial, happy person'. And he thanked me, saying 'I really appreciate that you are here'. Others have even made comments to me such as, 'You look the same, even after twenty years!' [*laughter*] So that shows the normal perception of how things don't seem to change.

The commentary then presents what serves as the answer:

Answer: Although forms and the other sense objects are renowned in the world as permanent, the fault that their impermanence is not established by prime cognition does not exist, because they are established as impermanent and so forth, i.e. suffering, empty and selfless by the illusory nominal prime cognition of yogis.

The answer presented here is suggesting that what the opponent is saying is true on one level: from a worldly point of view, that is indeed how we normally perceive things. *Although forms and the other sense objects are renowned in the world as permanent* indicates the perception of an ordinary being – that the objects they perceive are permanent. However, the **Madhyamikas** respond that *the fault that their impermanence is not established by prime cognition does not exist*, or is not true. This means that the way ordinary beings perceive things as being permanent does not contradict or nullify the prime cognition that perceives impermanence. That is the point. This is because forms and so forth are established as *impermanent, suffering, empty and selfless by the illusory nominal prime cognition of yogis*. These yogis have the prime cognition that perceives them as being impermanent and so forth.

The next argument is then presented:

Argument: This is in contradiction to the statement that seeing impermanence and the other characteristics is to see it as such.

The remaining lines of verse 8 that serve as an answer show there is no contradiction.

8bcd. It is seen as such in comparison to the world.

Otherwise the thought of a woman's impurity

Would be harmed by the world.

Answer: It is the mere assertion that in comparison to the grasping by worldly beings at purity, happiness, permanence and a self, that this is seen as such.

Here *this is seen as such* refers to seeing the world as being pure, happy and permanent and with a self, when in reality it is not like that. The **Madhyamikas** assert that merely seeing impure things to be pure, suffering as happiness, and impermanent things as permanent, is just in accordance with how they are perceived by worldly beings.

The commentary continues:

Otherwise, if being renowned by the world would be the measure for prime cognition, then it would follow that the yogi meditating on impurity, who has gained conviction regarding the impurity of the woman's

body, would be harmed by the worldly grasping at the purity of the woman's body.

Thus, if the measure of prime cognition were to be how it is perceived by worldly beings, then it would follow that when the *yogi* who is *meditating on impurity* or the imperfections of the body to the point where they have *gained the conviction regarding the impurity of a woman's body* (for a female *yogi* it would be the other way round), that prime cognition would be harmed by *the worldly grasping at the purity of the woman's body* and so forth. But the *yogi's* perception is not nullified or contradicted by the worldly perception.

The main point is that, just because the worldly perception of things is renowned and accepted as normal, that doesn't harm yogic prime cognition. The example given here is that of a *yogi* meditating on the impurities of the body - such as a male or female body - indeed all contaminated bodies including the impurity of one's own body. An ordinary being perceives the body - males in regard to a woman's body, women in regard to a male's body - as being completely pure and clean, with no imperfections or faults. However, a *yogi* who has meditated and developed a conviction about the impurities of the body will perceive it otherwise: he or she will see the impure body in its natural state, with its natural faults and imperfections. Thus, just because something is renowned as being pure in the worldly view doesn't mean that it is actually pure, likewise just because in the worldly view things are seen as permanent, it doesn't mean that they are actually permanent and so forth.

2.1.2.2.1.2.3.2. Refuting that the build-up of the accumulations would be invalid

The argument presented here is an objection to the Madhyamika assertion that things lack inherent existence. According to the **Realists**, if things lack inherent existence then one cannot possibly establish the functionality of karmic cause and effect and establish anything within the existence of samsara and liberation.

Argument: If there is no inherent existence, it contradicts the explanation that one accumulates merit through making offerings and such to the conquerors.

This is an objection expressed by the Sautrantikas. We need to pay close attention to the following presentations - which are presented in the format of a debate - questions and answers between the Madhyamikas and the lower schools. The ninth chapter of this text by Shantideva is renowned as the chapter that presents emptiness. The correct view of emptiness is established by eliminating all the hypothetical objections and doubts of the lower schools. Thus one comes to gain the correct understanding of the view of emptiness. At the same time, on a practical level, Chapter 9 also presents many logical reasons to establish the validity of the cause and effect of karma.

We need to pay particular attention to the lower schools' point of view where they say that if things lack inherent existence one can't establish the cause and effect sequence of karma. If things do not exist inherently, they argue,

how can you posit the functionality of the cause and effect sequence of karma?

What is being established in this chapter - very meticulously, logically and profoundly - is the functionality of the cause and effect sequence of things and events, not in spite of, but precisely because of their lack of inherent existence. This is the unique position of the **Prasangika Madhyamaka school**: things perform their function, and the cause and effect of karma is established, because they lack true existence. So while both Sautrantika and Prasangika agree upon the functionality of things, the unique position of the Prasangika is that they lack inherent existence.

The lower schools' views are in accord with our normal worldly perception. The presentations here can gradually help us understand how things exist while lacking inherent existence. If we spend ample time thinking about these points carefully and get a sense of the uniqueness and validity of the Prasangika presentation, we will gain a much deeper and more profound understanding of emptiness.

In the following passages the opponents argue that, according to the Prasangika view, one cannot establish samsara or nirvana; this is subsequently refuted. The refutation establishes that samsara and nirvana exist while lacking inherent existence. The essence of this refutation is presented in the *Heart Sutra* with the passage 'form is empty, emptiness is form'. This is a profound point and I have presented the meaning over a hundred times. I have explained it many times because it is the essential point regarding the correct view. So we need to get a really good, sound understanding of this point.

In fact, these are the essential points to understand if we wish to meditate on emptiness. It is extremely important to gain the understanding of how the deed, action and performer all equally lack inherent existence; understanding this is essential.

When we engage in meditation practice with this understanding our practice will indeed become a means to enhance our wisdom. The mind will become sharper, and we will gain more - and more profound - insights. Whereas if we are not careful and just focus on an object and try to develop a single-pointed focus on it - in other words, if we don't have a clear basis for gaining a profound understanding of the object we are focusing on - it can actually become a cause for the mind to become duller, rather than becoming sharper. If that were to occur, it would be a real pity if one has spent so much time and energy in the meditation, but it has resulted in the mind becoming duller. We need to be really careful about these points.

In order to succeed in our practice and achieve our goals we must have the aid of both method and wisdom. The need for both method and wisdom is presented in the Middle Way text, the *Madhyamakāvataṛa*, in the verse that gives the analogy of a crane that can fly and migrate far beyond the ocean with the aid of both wings. If one of the wings is injured or maimed, it could not possibly make that long-distance journey. In this analogy, the ocean is the ocean of samsara. In order to cross over the ocean of samsara to reach the pristine state of enlightenment, we

need the two wings of method and wisdom. Both are needed. Neither method nor wisdom alone is sufficient.

After the argument is presented, then comes the first two lines from the verse:

*9ab. Merits from the illusory like conqueror
Equal the ones from a truly existent.*

Answer: There is no contradiction. That one accumulates merit through making offerings to the conquerors that are illusory-like and lack true existence is just like your assertion that one accumulates merit through making offerings to a truly existent conqueror. Regardless of whether they are suitable to exist truly or not, one accumulates merit in accordance with the object.

The commentary shows that the preceding argument doesn't hold ground. According to the **Madhyamika's** position, *one accumulates merit through making offerings to the conquerors that are illusory-like and lack true existence*; while they appear to be truly existent to ordinary perception, they in fact lack any true or inherent existence. Thus, if one makes offerings to the conquerors who are illusory-like, one will still receive merit. It is similar to the **Sautrantika's** assertion that one accumulates merit through making offerings to a truly existent conqueror.

The last line of the commentary presents a really succinct point, which is *regardless of whether they are suitable to exist truly or not...* In other words, you, the **Sautrantika**, say that they exist truly and we, the **Madhyamika**, say that they don't exist truly, but regardless of who is right or wrong here, the fact remains that *one accumulates merit in accordance with the object*, that is, a holy object. So by making offerings, one can definitely accumulate merit. This is an essential point to keep in mind for our own practice.

2.1.2.2.1.2.3.3. Refuting that taking rebirth would be invalid

This is again according to the lower schools' position. Their argument is that if, for example, sentient beings are illusory, how could they take rebirth? The next two lines under this heading are:

*9cd. If sentient beings are like an illusion,
Then how can they be reborn after death?*

The commentary first presents the Realists' position, which is:

Argument: If sentient beings are like an illusion and lack true existence then, just like the illusory sentient being does not regenerate after disintegration, how are they reborn upon death?

That commentary presents the answer in relation to the meaning of the next verse:

Answer: We do not accept that sentient beings and illusions are the same in each and every aspect, but we accept that they are the same in existing truly or not. If the fault only relates to that, since you also accept dreams and illusions to be false, then your question is like asking if the basis for deception appears as a horse, then why doesn't it appear as a donkey.

The Prasangika **Madhyamika** position is that things and events, particularly sentient beings, are illusory-like, in

that while they lack true existence, they appear as being truly existent or inherently existent. Insofar as they do not exist in the way they appear, they are like illusions of conjured horses and elephants. When an illusionist conjures horses and elephants, they appear yet they do not actually exist. This is the analogy used here.

The **Realist** opponent says, *If sentient beings are like illusions like you say and lack true existence, then just like an illusory sentient being does not regenerate after disintegration, how are sentient beings reborn upon death?* This argument is very clever and intelligent because it is effectively saying that, after the magician's spell wears off the conjured horses and elephants do not recur again. Once the illusion has disappeared, it won't recur. This is a fact. In using that reasoning, the Realists are saying: therefore, if sentient beings were like illusions, they couldn't be reborn again after death just like an illusory sentient being doesn't regenerate after the illusion ceases. The answer to this is that they are not exactly the same.

In essence what the **Sautrantikas** are saying is that just as an illusion would not reappear or re-establish again after it disappears, likewise sentient beings being would not be reborn again after death. Their argument is presented here as a rhetorical question: 'How could they be reborn after death if they were an illusion?'

The **Madhyamikas** respond: *we do not accept that sentient beings and illusions are the same in each and every aspect, but we accept that they are the same in existing truly or not.* Further, they say that 'If the fault only relates to that, since you also accept dreams and illusions to be false, then your question is like asking if the basis for deception appears as a horse, then why doesn't it appear as a donkey?' In this case the basis for deception is a horse, not a donkey. The magician has not cast a spell to see a donkey – the spell produces only the illusion of a horse.

So while the basis for the illusion (in this case a horse) is seen, because the spell to see a donkey has not been cast, the illusion of a donkey is not seen. So the Prasangika are saying, your question regarding how sentient beings can be reborn if they are like an illusion, is similar to asking, 'How come an illusory donkey is not seen when one sees an illusory horse, since they are both similar in being an illusion? According to your question, it would imply that when one sees the illusory horse one would have to also see an illusory donkey!'

This will become clearer as we go further into the text.

So the next verse, which relates to this is:

*10abc. For as long as the conditions come together.
For that long even the illusion exists
Just because of a long continuity?
Sentient beings are truly existent?*

The commentary further explains:

Thus, for falsities, as long as the conditions are present, for that period of time the illusion exists.

As presented here, all illusory truths are presented as falsities because the definition of a truth is that **if there is no discrepancy between what appears and what actually exists, then it is a truth. Whereas if there is discrepancy between what appears to you and its actual existence, it is false.** Therefore, all illusory phenomena

are said to be falsities because there is a discrepancy in how they appear and how they actually exist – or they appear as truly existent, but in fact lack true existence; or they appear as inherently existent but in fact lack inherent existence. Therefore, for all falsities such as illusions, for as long as the conditions are present, then for that period of time the illusion exists.

To conclude the earlier paragraph of the commentary:

Similarly, for as long as the conditions of ignorance and so forth are complete, sentient beings will take rebirth.

This is the answer being presented by the Madhyamika.

The next counter argument from the **Realists** is:

Argument: It is not the same, as sentient beings exist from beginningless time.

What is being presented here is that while an illusion doesn't last for long, sentient beings in fact have existed from beginningless time. So because of their duration, say the Realists, you cannot say that sentient beings are like illusions. In other words, the argument is that because sentient beings have existed from beginningless time and thus for a long duration, it cannot be established that they are unreal like an illusion. Illusions are not true, argue the Realists, because they are very short-lived. That is what is being presented here.

The **Madhyamika** answer to that is:

Answer: It follows it is invalid to assert the distinction that sentient beings exist truly merely because they exist for a long time, and that illusions are false because they exist for a short while; if that was the case, then one would need to also accept a difference in the true and untrue existence of dreams and illusions as they have a difference in length.

Thus, if the criteria for something to be true or false were dependent on duration, then even illusions and dreams have different durations. Some illusions may last for a short while, but some can last for much longer. So, according to your, i.e. the Realists', assertion, the delusions that last for longer would be true, and the ones that lasted for a short time would be false. As the commentary further explains:

For in dreams, there are remembrances of an eon or just one day and so forth.

In dreams you might have a remembrance of a whole eon or just one day. Thus you Realists would have to assert that the dream of a long period of time, say, over one eon, would be true, and the dream about just one day would be untrue. But that is absurd and could not be the case.

2.1.2.2.1.2.3.4. Refuting that the division into virtue and negativity would be invalid

Here the argument from the **Realists** against the Madhyamikas is:

Argument: If they are like an illusion in that they lack inherent existence, then that would contradict that the killing and the like of sentient beings are negativities.

What they are saying is that if sentient beings are like an illusion, then you would not create negative karma by engaging in the act of killing them.

The verse which relates to this reads:

*11. The killing and the like of an illusory being
Is not a negativity because there is no mind.
Relative to those endowed with an illusory
mind
Merits and negativities arise.*

Answer: Regarding the killing and the like of an illusory person, if one pierces them with a weapon with the intent to kill on the basis of perceiving it as a human and the like, then one creates the negativity of action, but there is no actual karma of killing as it does not possess mind.

An illusory person would not be an actual person, but a magical illusion that appears like a person. If one pierced this illusory person with a weapon with the intent to kill on the basis of perceiving it as human, then one creates the negativity of action. This is a good point to keep in mind; while there is negative karma created in relation to engaging in the action of piercing this illusory human with the intent to kill, there is no actual killing. So one does not incur the karma of killing, as that object does not possess a mind. Because it is not an actual person, there is no act of killing. This is because the negative karma of killing is only complete when that person's life force has been severed. But the life force cannot be severed from an illusory person because as there is no consciousness there is no life force present.

The concluding statement presents a significant point:

By benefiting sentient beings endowed with an illusory mind, such as humans and so forth, one creates merit, and by harming them, one creates negativity.

Then the next argument is presented:

Argument: For those being the same in lacking inherent existence, how can there be a difference in generating a mind or not?

So the **Realists** then argue that, if you Madhyamikas say an illusory person and an actual person are the same in lacking inherent existence, how come one has a mind and one doesn't have a mind? How does that difference come about?

The verse relating to that is:

*12. Since mantras and the like do not possess the
power
An illusory mind does not arise.
The illusion that arises from manifold
conditions
Is also manifold.*

*13ab. That one condition can do it all
Is totally non-existent anywhere.*

The commentary related to this reads:

Answer: Because the illusory substances and mantras cannot generate an illusion with mind, the illusory horse and elephant do not have mind. The illusion that arises from various conditions also appears in various ways. The 'also' does not eliminate sentient beings.

That one needs various conditions for various results is because it is impossible for one condition to generate all results. That one condition cannot generate all results is totally non-existent anywhere.

What is being presented here in the commentary is that illusory substances – here, the word ‘substance’ would include medicines and mantras – cannot generate an illusion with regard to the mind. So the illusory horse and elephant do not have mind. In order for the magician to conjure horses and elephants, certain conditions have to be intact. It is said that the magician uses certain substances which, if used upon objects, will cause illusions to appear. Or it could be mantras. It is said that some magicians use mantras, which in the West we would call spells. When a spell is put on the people watching the spectacle, their eyes will see illusions. So the illusion is due to these conditions, such as the substances of medicines and spells, which are used by the magician to conjure the horses and elephants. These substances, however, do not have the power to produce a mind in the conjured illusions.

Extracts from *Entrance for the Child of the Conquerors* used with the kind permission of Ven. Fedor Stracke

Transcript prepared by Su Lan Foo
Edit 1 by Mary-Lou Considine
Edit 2 by Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe
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Thus, while a magician has the power to perform a magical illusion, he or she does not have the power to make mind or consciousness. If, through substances, mind and consciousness were to be able to be made, then by now scientists would have made many new minds. If, through spells or the power of mantras, it were possible to make minds, then magicians and yogis would have produced many beings. But that is not possible. This is a very significant point.

So while illusory substances such as the medicines and the mantras are the conditions for generating an illusion, they are not the conditions to produce a mind. And the reason why a mind cannot be produced is that the specific cause for a mind or consciousness is lacking. When the specific cause is lacking, that particular result cannot be produced. Mind has its own substantial causes for it to exist, which is a previous moment of mind. When the substantial cause for a mind is lacking, a mind cannot be produced. Therefore, mind does not exist in an illusion.

Furthermore, the commentary says:

The illusion that arises from various conditions also appears in various ways.

So there are various types of illusions – such as horses and elephants – because of the various types of causes, such as the different substances of medicines and mantras. However, while the different types of illusions are produced by different causes, one cause cannot possibly produce many different results.

Then the commentary continues:

The ‘also’ does not eliminate sentient beings. That one needs various conditions for various results is because it is impossible for one result to generate all results. That one condition can generate all results is totally non-existent anywhere.

The significant point here is that just because there is a cause for an illusion to arise and various causes for various types of illusions to arise, the notion that one cause can produce many results – such as an illusion, as well as a mind – is completely absurd; it is not possible.

What we take as personal instruction here is that, if we wish to experience certain types of result, we have to create the corresponding causes. It is not possible to obtain various results from just one cause.