

Shantideva's Bodhisattvacharyavatara

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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As usual let us spend some time for our meditation practice. (*meditation*)

We can now generate the motivation for receiving the teachings along these lines: for the sake of all mother sentient beings, I need to achieve enlightenment, so for that purpose, I will engage in listening to the teachings and put them into practice well.

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

2.1.2.2. DEFENDING ONE'S POSITION (CONT.)

2.1.2.2.3. Refuting the argument that the path realising emptiness has no use or purpose for a Madhyamaka¹

This is subdivided into two:

2.1.2.2.3.1. Argument

2.1.2.2.3.2. Answer

This is the continuation of the debate between the Mind Only and Madhyamika schools. The main point of disagreement is that the **Mind Only** proponents assert that there is no external existence, while the **Madhyamika** proponents assert that there is external existence. That is the basis of the argument between the two.

Specifically, Mind Only proponents assert that the subject and object – for example, form and the consciousness apprehending that form – are one in nature, not separate or distinct. Madhyamikas, on the other hand, would say that there *are* external forms and so forth that are perceived as existing and functioning externally.

When we mention Madhyamika here, we are specifically relating to the **Prasangika-Madhyamika**, i.e. Consequentialist Middle Way School. We make a distinction here because the Madhyamika School also includes the Svatantrika-Madhyamika school, amongst whom there are those who assert external existence.

This presentation in debate form is a useful way of understanding the subject we are studying. At a personal level, it enhances our intelligence or wisdom by increasing our ability to reason and analyse things.

Within the four different schools of Buddhist tenets in general, and within the Middle Way School in particular, we consider ourselves to be followers of the **Prasangika-Madhyamika** or **Consequentialist** system. If we do indeed hold that we are followers of the Prasangika-Madhyamika, then we need to understand the logical reasoning that characterises this system. We must really understand what it means, what its assertions are, and how its proponents use logic to assert their views.

Within the four Buddhist schools of tenets, proponents of the Mind Only School and the Madhyamika or Middle

Way School are followers of the Mahayana tradition, i.e. the Great Vehicle. We need to understand that the proponents of the four schools of tenets are differentiated by the different views they hold, whereas the distinction between the Theravada or Lower Vehicle, and the Mahayana or Greater Vehicle is based on the respective followers' conduct and practices.

Within the Mahayana, there is also the Perfection of Wisdom Vehicle and the Tantra Vehicle and the distinction here is again not based on views, but rather on the practices of each vehicle.

2.1.2.2.3.2.1. Argument

30. *Although knowing it to be like an illusion*

How can the afflictions be opposed?

Even the creator himself

Generates attachment for the illusory woman.

This verse is the argument presented by the **Mind Only**. The commentary then explains this verse:

Mind-Only: Although you may comprehend that all phenomena lack inherent existence, like an illusion, it will only cause exhaustion if it serves no purpose with regard to abandoning the afflictive and other obscurations. Even if it is asserted to serve a purpose, how can it reverse the afflictions? It follows it cannot – because one who can see that even the creator of the illusory woman, who realises it to be empty of an external woman, generates attachment by thinking of the illusory woman as something suitable to be enjoyed, and one has nothing beyond the initial realisations of emptiness through listening and contemplation.

When the **Mind Only** say, *Although you may comprehend that all phenomena lack inherent existence, like an illusion*, this is referring to the **Prasangika-Madhyamika's** unique assertion that all phenomena lack inherent existence. Both the **Svatantrika-Madhyamika** and **Mind Only** schools, on the other hand, assert that there is inherent existence.

Here, the Mind Only proponents are debating the Prasangika-Madhyamika assertion that things lack inherent existence, saying *it serves no purpose with regard to abandoning the afflictive and other obscurations*. In other words, the Mind Only are saying to the Madhyamika, "Your assertion that things lack inherent existence and are like an illusion cannot help abandon the afflictive and other obscurations, so what purpose does it serve? Since it doesn't serve any purpose, then making such an assertion and gaining that understanding merely causes exhaustion. There is no point."

What follows next is a meticulous argument presented by the **Mind Only** School. It is good to get a sense of how they prosecute their argument after having said that, if the Madhyamika view that things lack inherent existence doesn't serve any purpose, then it is merely a cause of exhaustion. The Mind Only continue to argue that: "If it is asserted that the Prasangika-Madhyamika view serves a purpose *then how can it reverse the afflictions?* How can this assertion that things lack inherent existence and are like an illusion reverse the afflictions?"

Then the Mind Only School presents an example to illustrate that this view could not bring about the result of abandoning the afflictions: *It follows it cannot – because one who can see that even the creator of the illusory woman, who*

¹ This heading was introduced on 26 July 2016. The heading numbering returns to the sequence used in the chapter as a whole.

realises it to be empty of an external woman, generates attachment by thinking of the illusory woman as something suitable to be enjoyed ... In simple terms, the Mind Only School is arguing that, when a male magician or illusionist conjures, for example, a beautiful woman, while the magician or illusionist may know it is an illusion, that doesn't prevent him from developing attachment to the illusion when he sees it as a very attractive and beautiful woman. Attachment and the desire to enjoy that illusion as if it were a real woman would still arise. Thus the **Mind Only** School is presenting a meticulous argument, saying that whilst the magician knows he is seeing an illusion, that doesn't prevent the afflictions, such as attachment, from arising, so the **Prasangika-Madhyamika** view that things are like an illusion does not serve a purpose, in terms of overcoming the afflictions.

The Mind Only proponents further argue that Prasangika-Madhyamika proponents have *nothing beyond the initial realisations of emptiness through listening and contemplation*.

In other words, the Mind Only is saying: "Your [Prasangika-Madhyamikas'] realisation of emptiness is nothing more than what you have gained from just hearing and contemplating, but lacks the realization gained from meditating. Your presentation of emptiness is merely based on listening and contemplating. Thus your presentation of emptiness cannot overcome the afflictions."

The **Prasangika-Madhyamika** School's answer is presented in the following three subdivisions.

2.1.2.2.3.2. Answer

This has three sub-divisions:

2.1.2.2.3.2.1. The reason why the illusionist generates attachment

2.1.2.2.3.2.2. Showing that meditating on the wisdom realising emptiness can overcome the afflictions and their imprints

2.1.2.2.3.2.3. Showing that one will receive the perfect complete result of abandonment.

The first part of the Prasangika-Madhyamika's answer responds to the Mind Only School's argument that the illusionist would still develop attachment to the illusory woman.

This answer can also help us understand how we develop attachment towards other objects. If one goes through the explanation slowly and tries to understand the point, the explanations given here are actually not too difficult to comprehend. For many of you to whom I have previously presented these teachings, this is basically a way to refresh these points.

2.1.2.2.2.1. *The reason why the illusionist generates attachment.*

The verse relating to the first part of the answer is:

31. *The creator has not abandoned the afflictive imprints
Regarding objects of knowledge.
Hence, when seeing them
The imprints of emptiness are weak.*

And the commentary explains: The illusionist that is the creator of the illusion has not abandoned in the slightest the afflictive imprints, i.e. true-grasping, with regards to the object of knowledge which is the illusory woman. Because they grasp at true existence, when they see the object, the imprints of realising emptiness are weak, and as a result they generate attachment.

If someone were to answer, 'The earlier has not abandoned the afflictions because his realisation of the illusory woman being empty of being a woman is only a partial emptiness, but in my system they are abandoned because the pervasive emptiness is realised', then this answer would be invalid.

Realising that the illusory woman is empty of being a woman is not a partial realisation of emptiness in relation to the subtle object of negation. If one has identified the object of negation, and then realised its non-existence on one phenomenon, then one can also understand it on other phenomena. This can be understood as explained in other places.

Thus in general, with regards to mistaken perceptions, to stop the non-conceptual mistaken perception of falling hairs due to the vitreous humour, it is not enough for the mental consciousness to understand the absence of falling hairs, which by itself does not stop the appearance of falling hairs. Rather one needs to clear the disease from the eye.

With regards to conceptual mistaken perceptions such as the grasping at the mottled rope as a snake due to adventitious conditions, the mere realisation of the rope will stop the mistaken perception. One does not need to meditate longer on this understanding.

Even the buddhas do not see a beginning of true grasping in the continuum of all migrators. The mental continuum has been intimately acquainted with true grasping since beginningless time; it is as if it has been 'baked in' to the continuum. Without even mentioning the seeds, just to stop coarse manifest self-grasping, it is not enough to merely realise the lack of true existence. Even if one realises the lack of true existence directly, it only abandons the intellectually acquired afflictions and their seeds, but not the innate ones. For that reason, the manifold presentation of the path of having to meditate for a long time on the path of meditation and the like was taught.

It is accepted that the conclusion of the realisation of emptiness is the elimination of the afflictions, and the realisation of emptiness can bring this about, but not immediately. It is not accepted that the afflictions need to be eliminated immediately upon the realisation of emptiness. The statement, 'How is that needed?' contains the answer.

The illusionist who creates the illusion of a woman has not abandoned the afflictive tendencies of true-grasping with regards to the object of knowledge of the illusory woman, and grasps at that object as truly existent. Hence, when he sees the illusory woman as empty of being a woman his imprints of realising emptiness are weak, and he does not have the ability to harm true-grasping as he does not possess anything that contradicts true-grasping.

The afflictive tendencies can refer to true-grasping, its seeds or the obscurations to knowledge, but here it is the earlier.

In showing the earlier Mind Only hypothetical statement as invalid, the **Prasangika-Madhyamika** proponents explain that realising the illusory woman as empty of being a woman is not a partial realisation of emptiness, in relation to the subtle object of negation. The point here is that earlier, when the Mind Only School presented the argument against the Prasangikas, they assumed the Prasangikas were asserting that the illusory woman was empty of the external woman, meaning that emptiness is the object not being an external woman.

The Prasangika School is now refuting this, saying that realising the illusory woman as being empty of an external woman is not, according to their view, even a partial emptiness. Earlier, the **Mind Only** School had argued that seeing the illusory woman as being empty of an actual external woman in itself would not overcome attachment and the other afflictions. Now the **Prasangikas** are saying that *the illusory woman being empty of an external woman is not even a partial emptiness* in relation to the object of negation.

The Prasangikas further explain that when the actual *object of negation is realised* in relation to one phenomenon, *one can also realise it* in relation to other phenomena, as explained in other places. Here, 'other places' refers to other texts. As you will recall, Aryadeva's *Four Hundred Verses* clearly explains that when the emptiness of one object or phenomenon is realised then, without needing much further investigation and reasoning, when that realisation is applied to all other objects, the emptiness of all other objects can be realised.

The commentary continues: *Then, in general with regard to mistake perceptions, to stop the non-conceptual mistaken perception of falling hairs due to the vitreous humour ...* The latter refers to an eye condition involving the vitreous humour in the eyeball. When someone sees falling hairs when in fact there is no falling hair, then that is an example of a non-conceptual mistaken perception.

The commentary says that, in order to overcome that *non-conceptual mistaken perception, it is not enough for the mental consciousness to understand the absence of falling hairs*. In other words it is not enough to think, "Although I see falling hairs, there are no actual falling hairs". Just that thought alone will not prevent the mistaken perception of falling hair. To overcome that non-conceptual mistaken perception, one has to actually cure the disease, for example, by taking some medicine or applying ointment that can stop the mistaken perception of seeing falling hairs. So it is not only a matter of the mind knowing that the perception is mistaken.

Having presented mistaken perception in relation to non-conceptual perception, the **Prasangika** then present *conceptual mistaken perception*, using the example of *grasping at the mottled rope as a snake due to adventitious conditions*. *Due to adventitious conditions* here means immediate conditions. As explained in the teachings, there are three immediate conditions required for a rope to be seen as a snake: the rope itself must be mottled, which means it has a pattern that makes it look like a snake; it is coiled like a snake; and the time of the day is such that it prevents you from seeing it clearly from a distance, for example, at dusk. So, under those conditions, a mottled rope could appear as a snake.

So, although initially one might feel fear as a result of seeing the object as a snake, all that is needed to overcome that mistaken perception is the mere realisation that it is a rope. One does not need to meditate longer on this understanding.

These examples show that both non-conceptual and conceptual mistaken perceptions can be overcome. If the non-conceptual mistaken perception is due to a condition like an eye disease, then all that is required to prevent the non-conceptual mistaken perception is to cure that eye disease. With a conceptual mistaken perception, all that is required to remove that mistaken conception is to understand, for example, that the object is actually a rope and not a snake.

As the **Prasangikas** explain further: *Even the buddhas do not see a beginning of true grasping in the continuum of all my migrators*. So while the Mind Only School asserts that there is true existence, according to the Prasangika, the grasping at true existence is what is to be overcome or abandoned. This abandonment, grasping at true existence, has existed within the mental continuum since beginningless time. Even the buddhas cannot see the beginning of this grasping at true existence within the mental continuum of sentient beings.

As the commentary further explains, the mental continuum has been intimately acquainted with grasping at true existence since beginningless time. *It is as if it is 'baked in' to the continuum*. The original Tibetan word translated as 'baked' can also mean well-ripened – in other words, it is as if self-grasping has become inseparable from the mind itself. So, leaving aside the prospect of overcoming the seed of self-grasping, even to just stop the coarse manifestation of self-grasping, it is not enough to merely realise the lack of true existence. This is the point being made here. Even overcoming the grosser or coarser manifest levels of self-grasping cannot be done just by the mere realisation of the lack of true existence.

Further, while it is not enough to merely realise the lack of true existence, to even stop the coarser manifestations of self-grasping, the commentary says: *Even if one realises the lack of true existence directly, it only abandons the intellectually acquired afflictions and their seeds, but not the innate ones*.

The conclusion here is that, *for this reason, the manifold presentation of the path of having to meditate for a long time on the path of meditation and so forth was taught*. When one attains the path of seeing on the five paths, that is when one gets the direct realisation of emptiness; the lack of inherent existence is realised at that point. However, as mentioned here, the initial direct realisation of emptiness can only overcome the intellectually acquired afflictions, but it doesn't overcome the innate ones.

Therefore, even after realising emptiness directly on the path of seeing, one has to go further. When reaching the path of meditation, even meditation itself is divided into nine different stages. All of these stages on the path of meditation relate to different levels of overcoming the subtle afflictions.

We can accept that *the conclusion of the realisation of emptiness is the elimination of the afflictions completely*. The **Prasangika-Madhyamika** proponent is saying here: "I

accept the conclusion that, having meditated on the realisation of emptiness — after having initially realised it directly, then further meditating on it again and again, perfecting that understanding of directly realising emptiness, and removing subtler levels of the afflictions gradually — at the end of this, there is a total elimination of the afflictions. That is what I accept.”

Thus the Prasangikas are asserting that the realisation of emptiness brings about the elimination of the afflictions, *but not immediately*. *It is not accepted that the afflictions need to be eliminated immediately upon the realisation of emptiness*. This a counter-argument to the Mind Only School's earlier assertion that when the illusionist merely sees the illusory woman as empty of actually being an external woman, that doesn't help to overcome the afflictions, specifically attachment to the illusory woman. So the Prasangika proponent is saying here: “I never stated that realising emptiness initially will immediately overcome all afflictions. It has to be further developed.”

This is a very important point. We can take it as a personal instruction because, leaving aside the debate with the Mind Only School, we definitely have this thought: “If I gain some understanding of emptiness, I might be able to really overcome all my afflictions and all my problems”.

In relation to the meaning of these lines: *The creator has not abandoned the afflictive imprints. Regarding objects of knowledge, the object of knowledge is the illusory woman. The commentary explains the Prasangika view that: The illusionist that creates the illusion of a woman has not abandoned the afflictive tendencies of true-grasping with regards to the object of knowledge of the illusory woman, and grasps at that object as truly existent. Hence, when he sees the illusory woman as empty of being a woman his imprints of realising emptiness are weak, and he does not have the ability to harm true-grasping as he does not possess anything that contradicts true-grasping. The afflictive tendencies can refer to true-grasping, its seeds or the obscurations to knowledge, but here it is the earlier*. This means that when we talk about the imprints of grasping at true existence, it can refer to the obscurations to knowledge, but here it is referring to the actual tendency to grasp at things as truly existent.

So the part of the Prasangika's response is:

2.1.2.2.3.2.2. Showing that meditating on the wisdom realising emptiness can overcome the afflictions and their imprints.

When one gains an understanding of the topic from the outline itself, one can comprehensively understand the presentation. Here, the sub-heading ‘Showing that meditating on the wisdom realising emptiness can overcome the afflictions and their imprints’ is the next part of the Prasangika response to the Mind Only School's earlier assertion that the illusionist still has attachment to the illusory woman while realising it to be empty. Here, the Prasangika School argues that meditation on the wisdom realising emptiness can gradually overcome the afflictions.

This section is further sub-divided into two:

2.1.2.2.3.2.2.1. General presentation

2.1.2.2.3.2.2.2. Specific presentation

2.1.2.2.3.2.2.1. General presentation

32. *Meditating on the imprints of emptiness
Abandons the imprints of phenomena;
Meditating on that called ‘completely non-existent’
Subsequently abandons even that.*

The commentary explains the meaning of this verse as follows:

By meditating on the imprints of emptiness, i.e. realising the lack of inherent existence of functionalities, the imprints of grasping at functionalities as truly existent are abandoned. By meditating on that called ‘completely non-existent’, i.e. by meditating on the lack of true existence as lacking true existence, subsequently even the true-grasping at the lack of true existence is abandoned.

If one only abandons the coarse object of negation, then one needs to subsequently abandon true existence, because true-grasping will only be abandoned from the time one has attained the cessation of the subtle object of negation from the point of view that true existence means an existent that does not exist as merely being posited by name. This will be explained later.

By meditating on the imprints of emptiness, i.e. realising the lack of inherent existence of functionalities, the imprints of grasping at functionalities as truly existent are abandoned. The mistaken conception to be abandoned is holding on to true existence. Thus, one meditates on the opposite, which is the lack of true existence, or lack of inherent existence. Meditating on the lack of inherent existence, and familiarising the mind with the lack of inherent existence through further meditation, will overcome the imprint of grasping at functionalities, of thinking that they are truly existent.

The next part is: *By meditating on that called ‘completely non-existent’, i.e. by meditating on the lack of true existence as lacking true existence, subsequently even the true-grasping at the lack of true existence is abandoned.* So even grasping at the lack of true existence can be abandoned through the meditation as well.

2.1.2.2.3.2.2.2. Specific presentation

33. *When it is said that nothing exists
The investigated functionality is not observed.
At that time the non-functionality lacks a basis,
How can it linger before one's awareness?*

The commentary explains this:

When it is said that any functionality lacks true existence, if the investigated functionality existed truly, it should be observable, but it is not. Therefore, when it is realised as lacking true existence, then the truly existent non-functionality lacks a truly existent basis. As a result, how could the refuted true existence then linger before one's awareness? As there is no suchness without subject, if the lack of true existence existed truly, it would have to be established as the nature of the subject, but that has already been refuted as being in the nature of true existence.

The first sentence of the commentary is quite clear. If a functionality – a thing or event – existed truly, then when it is investigated, it should be observable, i.e. one should be able to observe its true existence. But this is not the case. That, in itself, proves that things lack true existence.

*Therefore, when it is realised as lacking true existence, then the truly existent non-functionality lacks a truly existent basis. This is contradicting the earlier point where the **Mind Only** School asserts that even something that is false has to have a true basis. However, according to the **Prasangika** School, even the basis lacks true existence – the very basis of the lack of true existence itself lacks true existence. *As a result, how could the refuted true existence then linger before one's awareness?* Being a rhetorical question, this is saying it cannot, there is nothing left that is truly existent when the very basis also lacks true existence.*

If you pay attention and read these sections carefully, it should become clearer.

For the older students, the explanations presented here would be quite apparent and clear, because they have studied them previously so many times, and I have explained them many times before. So if you still don't get much of an understanding by reading it now, then the earlier explanation has not served much purpose.

However, for the newer students, of course, this topic initially appears to be quite complicated and perhaps difficult to comprehend right away. But you can refer to other teachings that present explanations such as, if something exists truly, how does it exist and why does it lack true existence? This is explained in *The Heart Sutra* and you can read commentaries on *The Heart Sutra* that explain this topic, as well as other commentaries and texts, including other commentaries on this text itself. By reading different explanations, one can get a more comprehensive understanding.

Also, the earlier teachings I gave on the tenets present the different assertions of the different schools, and thus they can become clear in one's mind.

This is where the older students can help out the newer students. If newer students have any questions or doubts, you need to approach older students so that they can share their knowledge and understanding. That is assuming that the older students are not still fumbling with their misunderstanding! *[laughter]*

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

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