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# Shantideva's *Bodhisattvacharyavatara*

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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Based on the refuge and bodhicitta motivation that we have generated during the prayers, we can now engage in our regular meditation practice. [meditation]

As we have just attempted to do in our short session, it is good to engage in meditation regularly like this. Engaging in meditation is a way to help to subdue the mind and in particular to bring the mind to a more peaceful state. The more we experience a calm and peaceful state of mind, the more it will contribute to a genuine sense of happiness.

Having a clear and bright state of mind is essential to our wellbeing. It ensures that wherever we go, and whatever we do will be of the utmost benefit. Meditation practice helps ensure that, through familiarity, we gradually become more and more accustomed to maintaining a positive and virtuous state of mind. The more we practise in this way, the more likely it is that we will achieve that state of mind.

If, along with a calm and peaceful state of mind, we can willingly accept hardships and difficulties then that will help us to overcome those difficulties. The fact is that we are bound to come across challenges and difficulties at different periods in our life. It's safe to say that a problem of some sort is always around the corner, and the best way to deal with any problem is by willingly accepting it.

We have the great fortune of studying this incredibly profound text. Pdraig recently asked me whether there is a specific text on the study of logic. My response was that there is no better text about logic than this very text we are studying now, *A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*. The logic used by Shantideva is in accordance with the logic of the great masters Nagarjuna and Chandrakirti. All three were very, very intelligent logicians who used very meticulous reasoning as a way to refute the assertions of other great masters such as Shantirakshita, who was also a great scholar. It is good to understand that when great scholars debate with each other they use very refined and subtle logic.

When the lineage masters of the lam rim are traced back, there are those who held the Prasangika-Madhyamika point of view and those who held the Svatantrika-Madhyamika point of view and so forth. This distinction is specifically pointed out

His Holiness the Dalai Lama regularly reminds us that we are following the Nalanda tradition. There are seventeen renowned pandits who were great scholars of this tradition, one of whom is Shantideva. Their analysis of the teachings was done in debate using reasoning and logic. Of course, the incomparably kind Buddha's teachings are the basis; however, they are not accepted at face value. Rather, they are analysed and re-analysed through reasoning and logic. Then, having been thoroughly investigated in this way, they have been established as being the ultimate intention of the Buddha. Through this analysis and debate, those who once held, for example, Mind Only School's views are later converted to the Prasangika or Consequentialist Middle Way school of thought. The way this is done is through logic.

We can use this approach on a practical level in our everyday life. Rather than being gullible and accepting whatever others say, we should only accept what is presented after carefully analysing using logic and reasoning. Investigate and use your reasoning skills to see whether what is being presented to you is valid or not, i.e. whether there is a logical reason to accept it or not. Then you will not be easily misled or influenced by negative friends. If you find yourself being easily influenced by negative friends, then that is a sign that you are not using logic and reasoning.

Some consider monks who are engaged in studies with a lot of debate to be somewhat stubborn. That is only because they do not accept things lightly without sound reasoning. For example, what may seem like a simple assertion such as, 'a vase is impermanent', is not simply accepted by saying 'yes, yes, it is impermanent'. Rather, it is debated for many hours, sometimes up to the early hours of the morning: Why is the vase impermanent? How can it proven to be impermanent? What would the consequence be if the vase were not impermanent? ...and so forth.

In the *Bodhisattva's Way of Life* Shantideva, who holds the Prasangika point of view, asserts that conventional (or illusory) truths lack inherent existence. The lower schools, such as the Realists, use reasoning to assert that things and phenomena do exist inherently, and the Prasangika present logical reasons to refute that.

The process presented in the teachings is that one reaches a final understanding and realisation through the process of first hearing instructions from others; then contemplating the understanding gained from hearing them; and finally meditating on the understanding gained from contemplation.

What one understands initially is based on what hears from others. Then based on the understanding gained from hearing, one uses one's intelligence to further investigate and analyse that understanding. This deeper insight and understanding derived from thorough analysis is unlike the understanding gained from merely hearing the instruction. That is because the wisdom one gains through contemplation and thinking is a wisdom that comes from within. One does not leave it just at that analytical understanding, but through meditation one takes it further to gain a deeper, and more profound level of understanding.

As explained in the teachings, the understanding one gains from hearing an instruction is an understanding based on the power of others, whereas the understanding one gains through contemplating the instruction is gained from one's own side. It is good to understand that distinction.

We can apply this on a more practical level to academic studies. I often hear of people finding it hard to choose a subject to study. If they were to use their reasoning and logic to investigate, say, five possible subjects, then through analysis they will be able to see which one of these five is the best choice.

In very simple terms, the advice is to first listen, from which you will gain some understanding. Don't leave it at that, but analyse that understanding further. Then you can use that understanding gained through analysis and investigation for the practice of meditation.

This is all just a prelude to show how, by paying a bit of attention to this seemingly complicated topic, it will become clearer if we just go through it slowly.

### 2.3.2.2. REFUTING THE ARGUMENT THAT THE TWO TRUTHS WOULD BE INVALID

This has three subdivisions:

- 2.3.2.2.1. Refuting the consequence of absurdity
- 2.3.2.2.2. Refuting the consequence of becoming endless
- 2.3.2.2.3. Showing there is no proof for the true existence of object and consciousness

#### 2.3.2.2.1. Refuting the consequence of absurdity

Here the proponent is a **Realist** who says that if there is no truly existent illusory truth, then there could be no ultimate truth either. Therefore both truths would cease to exist. That, the Realists say, is the absurd consequence of positing the lack of true existence.

*106ab. In case the illusory does thus not exist;  
How could both truths exist on it?*

The commentary begins the explanation of these two lines as an argument.

Previously object and object possessor were refuted as inherently existent, having been labelled as earlier and later. In that case, the same fault would apply to their illusory existence and, as there is no basis for the designation of any phenomenon if inherent existence is impossible, the illusory becomes non-existent. As a result, how can the two truths exist on it? They become non-existent.

*Previously object and object possessor were refuted as inherently existent*, relates back to the previous verse where the consciousness and the object of knowledge are refuted as being inherently existent on the basis of being *labelled as earlier and later*. *The same fault applies* to labelling them as *illusory*, as there will be *no basis for the designation of any phenomena* if inherent existence is impossible.

This is the Realists' presentation of what they see as the absurd consequence that would follow if all phenomena were to lack inherent existence. Their conclusion is *how can the two truths* be something that lacks inherent existence? This is a rhetorical question implying that the two truths could not exist.

Simply put, their argument is that if the illusory does not exist then ultimate truth would also not exist, and thus both truths would be non-existent.

A specific example of this logic is that if a vase, which has a conventional existence (and is therefore an illusory truth) were not to exist, then it would be impossible for the ultimate reality of the vase to exist as well. If the existence of the vase is negated then naturally there is no vase, and the ultimate reality or the emptiness of the vase cannot be established because there is no vase. So their logic is that if the illusory truth lacks inherent existence, then by implication it does not exist, and if illusory truth does not exist then ultimate truth could not exist as well.

The commentary continues:

If it is the case that you accept that the objects of form, sound and so forth exist truly to the perception of the illusion that grasps at them as inherently existent, but lack true existence from their side, and exist in an illusory manner.

Basically, the Realists saying to the Prasangika 'following your logic if you were to accept that the objects of form, sound and so forth exist truly to the perception of the illusory, which *grasps at them as inherently existent*, but they *lack true existence from their side and thus they exist in illusory*

*manner*. Then the following assumed absurdity of the Prasangika would arise.

The next two lines read:

*106cd. If it is illusory due to another,  
How can sentient beings go beyond misery?*

The commentary explains:

If we look at this, then just as the rope lacks a snake from its side, but exists as snake for the perception of the grasping at the rope as snake, your illusory existence is posited through the mere elaboration as existent by another awareness. If this is looked at, then how can sentient beings go beyond sorrow even conventionally? It follows that liberation becomes impossible – because everything that exists has been established as the mere delusion of a distortion. If this is accepted, then it follows that to comprehend the view for the purpose of liberation becomes meaningless.

In the Realists' arguments against the assumed Madhyamika position *if we look at this* refers to looking from the point of view of the logical consequence (according to the Realists assumption) of why the Madhyamika's assertion of illusory truth is flawed and absurd.

The example used is when under certain conditions a rope appears to be a snake, although in reality there is no snake there at all. To the mind perceiving the rope as a snake, it is as if one is seeing an actual snake and thus fear arises. However, the snake does not exist at all upon the rope.

Similarly *your illusory existence is posited through the mere elaboration as existent by another awareness*. Here the Realists are arguing against the Prasangika position of an illusory existence, saying 'your claim that there is illusory conventional existence is posited through the mere elaboration as existent by another awareness' but actually it does not exist. So *how can sentient beings go beyond sorrow even conventionally?*

*It follows that liberation would be impossible, because everything that exists has been established as the mere delusion of a distortion*. According to you Madhyamikas, the Realists say, things exist only to a distorted mind, and do not exist in reality. So *if this is accepted* – which is of course is not what the Madhyamikas say – *then it follows that to comprehend the view for the purpose of liberation becomes meaningless*. Here the Realists are using their own form of sound logic saying, 'We both accept that we want to obtain liberation and that the whole purpose of establishing the correct understanding of reality is so that we gain liberation. However, if we follow your assertions that purpose becomes meaningless'.

The next two verses serve as the answer presented by the Madhyamika.

*107. This separate mental superstition  
Is not our illusory.  
If it is subsequently ascertained, it exists.  
If it is not, it is not even an illusion.*

The commentary explains the meaning of the verse:

Regarding what is referred to as illusory existent accepted by the Madhyamika: that which is merely elaborated as existent by the mental superstition of true-grasping by a separate awareness that is mistaken with regard to the grasped object, is not the meaning of existing in an illusory manner in our own Middle Way system. In our system the meaning of existing in an illusory conventional manner is: because all phenomena posited as the objects of the

view realising the mode of abiding are realised as being empty of inherent existence, the illusory actions and activities of being generated, generating and so forth can be posited as existing, through being ascertained by prime cognition in an unconfused manner.

If it is not like this, and in our own system actions and activities cannot be posited as being established by prime cognition, then their illusory conventional existence wanes.

The answer presented here by the Madhyamika, specifically the **Prasangika-Madhyamika**, first presents the incorrect view of illusory truth that the Realists assume them to hold, and say 'this is not how we assert the illusory'.

The commentary reads:

That merely elaborated as existent by the mental superstition of true-grasping, by separate awareness that is mistaken with regard to the grasped object, this is not the meaning of existing in an illusory manner in our own Middle Way system. In our own system the meaning of existing in an illusory conventional manner is: because all phenomena posited as 'the objects of the view realising the mode of abiding' are realised as being empty of inherent existence, the illusory actions and activities of being generated, generating and so forth can be posited as existing, through being ascertained by prime cognition in an unconfused manner.

If it is not like this, and in our own system actions and activities cannot be posited as being established by prime cognition, then their illusory conventional existence wanes.

First the Prasangika-Madhyamika present the Realists' assumption of the Madhyamikas' assertion with respect to conventional or illusory truth, which is *that merely elaborated as existent by the mental superstition of true-grasping, is a separate awareness that is mistaken with regard to the grasped object*. Then they reject this presentation saying: *this is not the meaning of existing in an illusory manner in our own Middle Way system*. What is being established here is that the illusory truth that the Realists' claim is the Madhyamika view is not accepted in our system.

Then the actual the Madhyamika view of the meaning of *existing in an illusory conventional manner* is presented. *Because all phenomena posited as 'the objects of the view realising the mode of abiding' are realised as being empty of inherent existence, the illusory actions and activities of being generated, generating and so forth can be posited as existing through being ascertained by prime cognition in an unconfused manner. If it is not like this, and in our own system actions and activities cannot be posited as being established by prime cognition, then their illusory conventional existence ceases to exist.*

This is really a very profound presentation that establishes how beings and the environment exist in a conventional or illusory manner while being empty of inherent existence. His Holiness Dalai Lama emphasises this point regularly in his teachings. I have also explained the meaning of this essential point previously.

It is to be understood as presented in this verse of the *Guru Puja*:

Samsara and nirvana lack even an atom of true existence  
While cause and effect and dependent arising are infallible.  
I seek your blessings to discern the import of Nagarjuna's intent –

That these two are complementary and not contradictory.

The presentation here in the text expresses the ultimate view of the forerunners of the Prasangika view, Nagarjuna and Chandrakirti, as well as the great scholars such as Shantideva who followed them. We need to gain a good understanding of that which is the crux of the Prasangika view.

The essential point being presented here is that there is no contradiction between appearance and emptiness but rather a union of the two.

More specifically, as presented in the commentary '*the objects of the view realising the mode of abiding' are realised as being empty of inherent existence*. When phenomena are seen as being empty of inherent existence, that enables the establishment of actions and activities as being generated and so forth in an illusory manner. The point being presented here is that the understanding of emptiness and the understanding of the interdependent nature of phenomena, are not contradictory but rather complementary. As Lama Tsongkhapa mentioned, it is at this point that one's understanding of the ultimate view is thoroughly established.

Understanding the empty nature of phenomena actually relates to subtle illusory or conventional truth. Through not understanding this essential point, other schools take the wrong turn and establish illusory truth as being inherently existent. According to the other schools, if things lack inherent existence then that would negate all existence.

It is essential to have the correct view of emptiness. If one is not able to establish the interdependent nature of all phenomena, and thus the illusory truth or existence of phenomena, then there is a danger of completely negating the existence of all phenomena, and that is where one would fall into the extreme of nihilism. So we really need to understand the non-contradictory relationship between conventional or illusionary phenomena and emptiness. To gain a clear understanding of this, the commentary emphasises this point when it says, *ascertained by prime cognition in an unconfused manner*.

As further explained in the commentary, *if it is not like this, and in our own system actions and activities cannot be posited as being established by prime cognition, then their illusory conventional existence ceases to exist*. The understanding of illusory truth refers here to gaining the understanding of subtle illusory truth.

This point refers to the agent, the action and the activity or karma that is created. The **Svatantrika-Madhyamika** school posits the lack true existence of the agent, action and activity (karma that is created) that is performed, but they are not able to establish the lack of inherent existence of the action, agent and activity.

Only the **Prasangika Middle Way School** is able to establish, through logic and reasoning, that the agent, the action and activity lack inherent existence. There is not even an atom of inherent existence in all three. It is only the Prasangika-Madhyamika School that presents the profound logic and reasoning of how the lack of inherent existence, rather than negating existence, actually establishes the existence of the illusory truth – this is the unique presentation of the Prasangika Middle Way school. It is in this way that one gains an understanding of subtle illusory or conventional truth. As I have presented many times in previous teachings, this has the same meaning as the lines in *The Heart Sutra*

which say, *form is empty, emptiness of is form*. It all comes down to the same point.

When the understanding of interdependent origination dawns upon oneself, it enhances the understanding of emptiness, and when the understanding of emptiness dawns upon oneself, it enhances the understanding of interdependent origination. At that point, one has come to the correct understanding of the Prasangika view.

What this means is that a prime cognition establishes interdependent origination without having to rely on another prime cognition. The right view of emptiness is established when the same primary awareness or cognition that establishes interdependent origination is also able to establish the empty nature of the phenomena and vice versa. When the prime cognition that realises emptiness is also able to establish interdependent origination, one will then have gained the correct and unmistakable understanding of the Prasangika view.

Although elaborate explanations are available to help enhance our understanding, it is good to begin with a simple but correct understanding of what is being presented here. Then, based on that, one can further expand that understanding with a more elaborate explanation. So it is good to begin with this simple understanding, which will shed light on the correct view.

As presented in the teachings we have this mistaken perception of the self as being inherently existent, and existing independently, which is called grasping at an inherently existent self. First, we need to understand what that wrong conception is. What does it mean to grasp at an inherently existent self?

With a good understanding of what that misconception is then, as the teachings present, we can go further. The self that is perceived by the wrong conception of grasping at a truly or inherently existent self does not exist in the way that it is perceived by that wrong conception. What does that mean? If such a self were to exist, then how would it exist? As one begins to understand the absurdity of a self that does not depend on any other factor, existing in and of itself, then the understanding of the lack of an inherently existent self begins to dawn upon oneself. One is getting closer to the correct understanding of selflessness.

When engaging with the explanations in the teachings, we may think, 'Oh, we need to realise selflessness as a way to overcome the misconception of grasping at a truly or inherently existent self'. However, we run the risk of becoming wrapped up in such words. Using these explanations to relate only to other phenomena is the wrong approach.

The proper approach is to relate the teaching to oneself. Setting aside the investigation of other phenomena for the time being, look at how we perceive ourselves, and then try to understand the lack of inherent existence of one's own self. It is essential to understand how grasping a truly existent self, is a misconception that we hold on to at all times. That is what we need to target – overcoming the misconception of grasping at an inherently and truly existent personal self. If we take this approach when contemplating selflessness, then we will reach a point where our meditation practice becomes more meaningful.

We might assume a rigid posture and try to focus single-pointedly on one object, which may have some effect in settling one's mind. But that alone will not help to overcome the afflictions within us, which serve as the very root of all

our misconceptions. Grasping at true existence will not be shattered if we just focus single-pointedly on an object just to calm our mind.

We have access to the teachings, and we have heard them many times, so it is good to actually think about the profound explanations on emptiness again and again. We won't accomplish much of an understanding just by reading the texts just occasionally and glancing at them once in a while. It is only by really contemplating them again and again that we develop a deeper understanding. Of course, emptiness is a difficult topic to understand, and not easy to meditate on.

When I was in India recently, there was a young geshe staying with us. We had quite a few discussions and he commented, 'Oh, there are so many explanations about the right view and so forth. What do you think about it?' I related some points that I understand as the correct view. Of course, I said that this was just my understanding. He is a learned geshe himself, and he was quite interested in what I had to say.

Last year I had a discussion on meditating on emptiness with another geshe, who was from the Gaden Jang-Tse monastery. I commented, that meditating on emptiness might not be too difficult if one has a bit of understanding, however at our level, meditating on impermanence seems to be really difficult. I made the comment that it seems that we really need a good understanding of impermanence to be able to shatter clinging to the worldly affairs focusing merely on this life. One can safely say that without a proper understanding of impermanence, one cannot even practise the Dharma properly. Leaving aside emptiness, we find meditation on impermanence hard enough.

When I responded in that way, the other geshe said, 'I was attempting to dig out some understanding of emptiness from a scholar, but I got only an explanation of how to overcome the eight worldly dharmas'. But then he said, 'Well, of course I agree that it is very difficult to overcome the eight worldly dharmas'. So, he understood my point that without an understanding of impermanence, one cannot overcome the eight worldly concerns.

The main points that I emphasise regularly is that we have this great opportunity now of having access to the Dharma, and we should not waste this incredible fortunate time. The main point of practice, as the great masters of the past have emphasised, comes down to the ways to cultivate love and compassion, and being kind to others. The benefits of this are obvious. You can definitely see that if you are kind and considerate to others, you will receive benefit yourself in return. On the other hand, if you engage in harmful intentions towards others, you will be harmed yourself. This is very obvious. The essential point is developing a sense of genuine concern for others, and then further enhancing that love and compassion. As I often emphasise, this is really the main point of our practice.

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

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