

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 engage in our meditation practice.

[*tong len meditation*]

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

Setting this motivation and then listening to the teachings will ensure positive imprints are left on our mindstream.

2.3.2.3.1.3.2.2. The fault does not apply to the Madhyamika

The first verse under this heading is:

138. *In case prime cognition is not valid
Doesn't what it comprehends become false?
For that very reason your
Meditation on emptiness is invalid.*

The Realists present this argument:

Realist: If, according to you, prime cognition is not ultimately prime cognition, then it is a false prime cognition, and in this case does not its comprehended object also become a false distorted object not existing in the way it is comprehended? It follows that it becomes that – this is the case because the comprehending prime cognition is false. For that very reason, because the comprehending prime cognition is false, that which you posit as meditation on emptiness becomes distorted and invalid.

Then Madhyamika respond as follows:

Madhyamika: Take the subject 'object of knowledge' – for us it is very valid that the prime cognition that comprehends emptiness, and the emptiness posited by it are false. To ascertain the negation of the functionality true for conception depends on the appearance of the object of negation arising in the mind. It follows it is like this – because ...

The Realists' objection to the Prasangika position is that *if prime cognition is not ultimately prime cognition as you say, then it is a false prime cognition*. In that case isn't the comprehended object also a false distorted object that does not exist in the way it is comprehended? According to the Realists, both prime cognition and that which is apprehended exist truly. The Realists are saying to the Prasangika that if prime cognition is false, then what it apprehends should also be false. That is the main point being raised here.

The Realists continue with *it follows that it has to be that, because the comprehending prime cognition is false*. They are saying that if the comprehending prime cognition is false, then the apprehended object that it perceives should also be false.

For that very reason, they say, what you posit as meditation on emptiness is distorted and invalid, or not tenable.

The Madhyamikas say: *Take the subject 'object of knowledge' – it is valid to say that the prime cognition that comprehends emptiness, and the emptiness posited by it are false*. The Realists

have said: "How can you claim a valid cognition perceiving an ultimate reality if the cognition itself is false?"

They are in fact using logical reasoning to point out that a false cognition could not perceive a true object. In response the Madhyamika say: "We accept that the prime cognition is false, and what is being apprehended is also false, i.e. emptiness is also false in so far as it lacks true existence".

We need to be careful not to misunderstand this. By saying that emptiness is false because it doesn't exist truly, the Madhyamika are, of course, not saying that emptiness is not an ultimate reality. What will be explained later in the text is that while the Realists are not able to conceive of a false cognition perceiving an ultimate object, the Madhyamika explain how, through perceiving a false object, a false cognition contributes to comprehending the ultimate.

The main point of the debate here is that the Realists posit all existence as being truly existent, while the Madhyamika say that things actually lack true existence, i.e. that things are not truly existent.

The Madhyamikas' essential point is that *ascertaining the negation of the functionality true for conception depends on the appearance of the object of negation arising in the mind*. The next verse explains the reasoning, which is the essential point.

139. *Without contact with the analysed object
One will not apprehend its non-existence.
Therefore the non-existence of any
False object is clearly false.*

The commentary explains:

... without the conceptual thought making contact with the analysed object of true existence, i.e. if the aspect of true existence does not appear to the mind, then the investigating thought will not apprehend the object of being empty of true existence, which is the lack of true existence. Therefore, because the falsity that is the object of negation is impossible, therefore the negation that is the non-object is clearly also false.

The example of the earlier is: Without the aspect of the child of a barren woman appearing to the conceptual mind, the aspect of a dying child of a barren woman does not appear.

If the emptiness of true existence that lacks the object of negation exists truly, then the appearance of the lack of true existence to the knowing inferential cognition also needs to exist truly.

The explanation in the commentary begins with *without contact with the analysed object one will not apprehend its non-existence*. This is the main point to be understood. *The conceptual thought making contact with the analysed object of true existence refers to the aspect of true existence not appearing to the mind*. The commentary says that the absence of the object of negation will not be understood unless the conceptual thought has clearly identified, and really understood, what the object of negation is.

To make this clearer, the *analysed object* refers to true existence, and *will not apprehend its non-existence* refers to emptiness. What is being explained is that the non-existence or lack of true existence, i.e. emptiness, cannot be understood without first having a clear understanding of how the conceptual mind apprehends things as being truly existent. That is the main point.

If you understand this point then the meaning of this passage is clear. The commentary clarifies *without the conceptual thought making contact with the analysed object of true existence... by adding... if the aspect of true existence does not*

appear to the mind, then the investigating thought will not apprehend the object as being empty of true existence, i.e. lacking true existence.

This explains the meaning of the first two lines of verse 139.

The commentary then explains the remaining two lines of the verse beginning with: *Therefore, because the falsity that is the object of negation is impossible, the negation that is the non-object is clearly also false.*

Then an example is given: *Without the aspect of the child of a barren woman appearing to the conceptual mind, the aspect of a dying child of a barren woman does not appear.* This example is a good illustration of the point that was made earlier, which is that without a clear understanding of what true existence is, the lack of true existence cannot be understood. Although a barren woman's child does not exist, without knowing what a barren woman's child means, one cannot even conceive of the impossibility of the death of a child of a barren woman.

The commentary continues: *If the emptiness of true existence that lacks the object of negation exists truly, then the appearance of the lack of true existence to the knowing inferential cognition also needs to exist truly.* The *knowing inferential cognition* mentioned here refers to the inferential cognition that apprehends emptiness. As explained in other texts, emptiness exists as it appears to the meditative equipoise of an arya being, but doesn't exist as it appears to the knowing inferential cognition, because to this cognition emptiness appears as truly existent. What is being explained in the commentary is that if emptiness were to exist truly then it would have to exist as it appears to the *knowing inferential cognition*, but that is not the case.

The reason why emptiness doesn't exist as it appears to the knowing inferential cognition is because it is a mistaken consciousness. As I have explained in previous teachings, except for the meditative equipoise of arya beings in which there is no true appearance at all, consciousnesses of all other sentient beings are necessarily mistaken. That is because when a sentient being's consciousness apprehends objects, it perceives them as being truly existent due to the imprints of true grasping in their mind. It is only an enlightened mind that doesn't have any true appearance at all. That is the point being made here: while the *knowing inferential cognition* apprehends emptiness, it still has the appearance of emptiness as truly existent.

Then the commentary further explains:

If one looks at this, a collection with only one part negated is impossible, and because the object of negation appears truly to it, the true appearance needs to also exist truly. In this case, true existence should be an existent, which it is not. The emptiness of true existence that has abandoned it, is also false and not truly established.

The point being explained is that *while emptiness* appears as being truly existent, it actually lacks true existence.

The commentary further explains:

This point is shown in the *Root Wisdom*, 'In case something slightly non-empty exists'. Without the meaning generality of the lack of true existence appearing to the mind, one does not properly ascertain the lack of true existence, and therefore one needs to be proficient in identifying the object of negation.

This is another succinct point. *Without the meaning generality of the lack of true existence appearing to the mind* refers back to the necessity for having a good understanding of the way true existence appears to the mind. Without having a proper

understanding of that, one cannot properly ascertain the lack of true existence and therefore one needs to be proficient in identifying the object of negation. So it is very important to have a clear understanding of what is being refuted, which is the object of negation.

In simple terms this means that one should have a clear understanding about how things and events would have to exist if they were to exist truly. One has to have a very clear understanding of this point. This emphasises the point that it is crucial to identify the object of negation.

The next verse under this heading is:

140. *Thus, the thought thinking,
'The dream child has passed away'
Cancels the thought thinking that it
Exists, and it is false.*

The commentary explains:

For this reason: When e.g., in a dream one observes the child dying and thinks, 'Now it does not exist anymore', this thought cancels out the thought thinking that it does exist.

Just as these two, the dream object of abandonment and the dream antidote are false, so it is not contradictory for the false antidote to destroy the false object of abandonment, and for the false prime cognition to comprehend the false object of comprehension.

It is not the same for you because the Enumerators accept all phenomena as truly existent, and do not know how to posit a false prime cognition.

This analogy should be quite clear. *In a dream one observes a child who is dying or who is actually dead and thinks, 'now the child does not exist anymore', and this thought that the child does not exist anymore eliminates the thought of the child as still existing.* Even though *both the dream object of abandonment and the dream antidote are false*, having a false antidote destroy a false object of abandonment is not contradictory. Using the same reason, it is not contradictory for a false prime cognition to comprehend a false object of comprehension.

The contradiction presented by the Enumerators is that if the prime cognition is false, then it could not perceive a true object. But for the **Madhyamika**, of course, this is not a contradiction. *It is not the same*, indicates that it is not the same for us because *the Enumerators accept all phenomena as truly existent, and do not know how to posit a false prime cognition.*

As mentioned previously, for us, a prime cognition can comprehend emptiness. While Enumerators cannot posit a true prime cognition perceiving a false object, for us, a prime cognition, which may be false itself, can also perceive an object that lacks true existence. That is a point being presented here.

2.3.2.3.1.4. Summarising the meaning of generation from no-cause

The first two lines of the next verse are presented:

141ab. *Therefore, by analysing in such a way
There is nothing without a cause*

Then the commentary explains:

Therefore, for these reasons, if one investigates with the reasons mentioned above, not only does generation from discordant causes such as Ishvara and the primary principal become impossible, saying 'there is no result that generates without a cause', it is also the concluding summary of the refutation of causeless generation.

This explanation is quite clear, so not much further explanation is needed. *If one investigates the many reasons that were presented earlier, the generation from discordant causes such as Ishvara, as some non-Buddhists posit, and the primary principal as others posit, is impossible. Saying 'there is no result that generates without a cause' it is also the concluding summary of the refutation of causeless generation.* In other words the argument that something can be generated without any cause is refuted.

A significant point to reflect upon here is that investigating with the various reasons that were presented earlier implies that the arguments and refutations are not just accepted blindly, or that some parts are accepted and other parts are 'left to beg'. Rather, the conclusion that the generation from discordant causes – such as Ishvara and the primary principal – is not tenable arises from thorough investigation with many reasonings. When careful logical reasons are presented the conclusion has to be accepted. Here the conclusion is that causeless generation is not tenable because all the arguments have been refuted, and so the conclusion has to be accepted. This is also in line with what I usually share with you, which is that you need to use your intelligence and wisdom to decide things.

2.3.2.3.1.5. Refuting generation from both self and other

This section begins with the comment in the commentary:

These four lines can be a summary for the refutation of generation from three principles, and can also be related to the refutation of generation from both self and other.

It's important to understand this. What is being refuted here is generation from both self and other.

Generation from self refers to generating from a separate permanent self as the non-Buddhist schools posit. That was refuted earlier. Generation from other refers to an effect that is generated from an inherently existent cause. All schools, including the Buddhist schools below the Prasangika assert such a cause. Here the Prasangika refute generation from both self and other.

The lines relating to this are:

141cd. *It also does not abide on the individual Conditions or their collection;*

142ab. *It does not come from other, It does not abide or go.*

The commentary explains:

The sprout abides neither inherently on the individual causes such as the water, fertiliser, warmth and moisture nor on their collection, as a juniper tree would abide on the bronze base¹. If it abides in such a way it should be observable, which it is not. It is the same for other results. They also do not exist at that time because without the conditions taking shape the sprout cannot be generated. It also does not come from some- thing other than these conditions, it also does not abide inherently upon having been generated inherently, and it does not go somewhere else upon cessation. Hence, it does not exist inherently in the slightest, and therefore there is also no generation from self, generation from other or generation from both self and other.

In short, this establishes the directional property of the argument, 'take the subject the aggregates and the person': it follows they are not generated inherently –

because they are not generated from self, generated from other, generated from both or generated from no cause.

As the commentary explains, *the sprout abides neither inherently on the individual causes such as the water, fertiliser, warmth and moisture nor on their collection.* The assertion is that the sprout is generated from the collection of all of these causes. For the sprout to generate it is initially dependent on the seed and then other conditions such as fertiliser, warmth and moisture. The fact that it depends on all of these causes shows that the sprout does not exist inherently, and it does not abide inherently on any one of individual causes or the collection itself.

The analogy is that they are like *a juniper tree that abides on a bronze base. If it abides in such a way then it should be observable, which it is not and it is the same for other results.* If the cause were to exist inherently then the sprout would have to be observable at the time of the cause, but it is not observable. This indicates that while the sprout depends on causes it does not exist at the time of the cause. That is what refuting generation from self means.

They also do not exist at that time because without the conditions taking shape the sprout cannot be generated means that the sprout cannot exist or be generated while the necessary conditions are being assembled. *It also does not come from something other than these conditions* means that since the sprout does not exist before the conditions such as fertiliser and so forth come together, it does not exist inherently at that time or at any other time.

It does not come from something other than these conditions means that since it depends on these conditions, it cannot be produced from anything other than these conditions. *It also does not abide inherently upon having been generated* means it is not generated inherently nor does it abide inherently. Furthermore, *it does not go somewhere else inherently upon cessation.* The conclusion here is *that it does not exist inherently in the slightest, and therefore there is also no generation from self, generation from other or generation from both self and other.* That is how it is refuted.

A summary of this is presented in the next paragraph of the commentary.

In short, this establishes the directional property of the argument, 'take the subject the aggregates and the person': it follows they are not generated inherently – because they are not generated from self, generated from other, generated from both or generated from no cause.

The syllogism here is *Take the subject 'the person and other phenomena': it follows they are not generated inherently from self – because they are not generated from self, generated from other, generated from both or generated from no cause.* This syllogism is related to the syllogism known as the King of Reasoning as explained in *Root Wisdom*, which is, "take the subject 'persons and phenomena': they do not exist inherently – because they are dependent arising". This syllogism specifically states that, persons and phenomena are not generated inherently, whereas the earlier syllogism said they do not exist inherently. It's a slight difference but it comes down to the same point.

The King of Reasoning is the syllogism that uses the reasoning that the subject, whatever it may be, is a dependent arising, and this applies to all phenomena. Since the subject here, persons and phenomena, is all-inclusive,

¹ Another translation says it's just a metal base.

saying that they do not exist inherently because they are dependent arising applies to all phenomena.

The reasoning in the syllogism presented in the commentary is that since the aggregates and the person are not generated inherently, then that has to apply to all generated phenomena. The *aggregates and persons* are phenomena that have a particular cause, and are therefore generated. Thus, *they are not generated from self, generated from other, generated from both or generated from no cause.*

2.3.2.3.2. *The reason of dependent arising*

142cd. *How is that made true by delusion
Different from an illusion?*

The explanation in the commentary begins with:

What difference is there between the object labelled and made true by afflicted delusion, i.e., ignorance, and an illusion, dream, reflection and so forth? They appear as inherently existent while being empty of inherent existence.

This is a point that supports the earlier explanations. *What difference is there between the object labelled and made true by afflicted delusions, for example ignorance, or an illusion or a dream, or a reflection and so forth? Although things appear as being true, they are actually known to be false. Likewise, though things appear as being inherently existent, they are actually empty of inherent existence.* The point being made here is that conventionally we all accept these as false, which is also the case for the lack of inherent existence.

The next verse reads:

143. *That magically generated by a magician
And that magically generated by a cause
Where do they come from, where do they go?
You should analyse this.*

Then the commentary explains:

If the illusory horse and elephant conjured by the magician and the functionalities conjured by the causes and conditions were to exist truly then, when they are generated, they should come from somewhere else, and when they cease they should go somewhere else. In this case it should be analysed where they come from and where they go to. Because they do not possess inherent coming or going, take the subject 'the person and the aggregates' - they lack inherent existence - because they are dependent arising, e.g., like a reflection of a form.

The commentary starts with an example, *if the illusory horse and elephant conjured by the magician, and the functionalities conjured by causes and conditions were to exist truly, then when they are generated they should come from somewhere else, and when they cease they should go somewhere else.* This is saying that illusions may look like they actually exist, in that they come and go. But that is not the case.

Where do they come from and where do they go? The conclusion is that they do not inherently come or go, which relates to the earlier syllogism that was based on the subject 'the person and the aggregates'. The syllogism here uses the same subject. Take the subject '*the person and the aggregates: they lack inherent existence - because they are dependent arisings.*' The example is *like a reflection of form.*

First of all as mentioned earlier, one needs to contemplate how the person and aggregates would have to exist if they were to exist truly. What would their mode of existence be if they were to exist truly? Once you really understand that question then the syllogism should make sense. The subjects, which are persons and aggregates, lack inherent existence,

because they are dependent arisings. This implies that if they were to exist inherently, then they could not be dependent arisings i.e. they could not depend on anything else. But since they are dependent arisings, they cannot exist inherently.

To gain an understanding at a more personal level, we first need to accept the fact that we still have the misconception of grasping at a truly existent person. What does grasping at ourselves mean? We have this misconception that a person exists truly or inherently, so how do we relate that to ourselves.

The investigation begins by first analysing how we perceive ourselves? How does the misconception of grasping at a self, apprehend the self? As explained in the teachings, the misconception of grasping at a self apprehends a self that exists without depending on any other causes and conditions, existing from its own side in and of itself. That is how the 'I' appears to exist for the misconception of grasping at a true self.

The next investigation is to analyse and check whether the 'I' actually exists in that way or not? We investigate by asking: "Do I exist independently, without depending on any other causes and conditions?". When we realise that such an 'I' could not possibly exist in this manner, then an understanding of how the 'I' lacks true existence will begin to dawn on us. So we need to overcome that misconception of grasping at a truly existent self starting with our own personal individual self.

It is impossible to meditate on emptiness without having scrutinised and really understood how that misconception of grasping at a self appears to us. If whatever understanding of emptiness we have does not actually counteract grasping at the self, then claiming to be meditating on emptiness is quite lame. The very purpose of meditating on emptiness is to overcome the misconception of grasping at a self beginning with our own individual self. If we are indeed meditating on emptiness adequately, then the longer the time we spend in meditation the less intense our grasping at a truly existent individual self will become, and eventually it will be completely overcome. In simple terms, meditation on emptiness has to be able to counteract the misconception of grasping at an individual self.

The manner of conducting the investigation on a personal level is explained very clearly in *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand*. As presented there, an appropriate time to investigate how the personal 'I' appears to us when a strong sense of 'me' is evoked. For example when someone criticises us, or accuses us of doing something that we haven't done, our self-defence mechanism is triggered and we become outraged: "How dare you accuse me!, I didn't do that!". In that instance how does the 'me' or 'I' appear to us? When we notice that this 'me' or 'I' appears to be completely independent, existing in and of itself, then that is when we are beginning to identify the object of negation.

Likewise when something good happens and we feel elated, thinking: "Oh, I feel so happy, something really good has happened to me". How does the 'I' or 'me' appear to us at that time? If that 'I' appears to be existing independently in and of itself, and not dependent on any other causes and conditions, then such a fabricated 'I' or 'self' is the object of negation that has to be refuted. That how *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand* explains how to investigate the 'I'.

For us ordinary beings the usual way that forms appear to us is said to be the appearance of the object of negation.

When we ordinary beings apprehend form, it appears to us as existing independently, in and of itself. Thus the appearance of the object that we apprehend is the object of negation.

It appears to exist independently in and of itself because the form appears as something that exists 'out there'. Regardless of the fact that it is imputed by the mind, it actually appears to exist 'out there', from its own side. That is the appearance of the object of negation for ordinary beings. I have explained this many times in the past, so we need not spend too much time on this again.

The next verse reads:

144. *That which is seen due to proximity
To something, which likens the artificial
reflection
In being not if that does not exist,
How could it possess a true reality?*

The commentary explains the meaning of the verse:

Any result, such as compositional factors or the sprout are seen to generate in proximity to their cause, such as ignorance or the seed and the like. Because they are artificial phenomena that are not generated if these causes do not exist, they are like a reflection of form. How could they exist in the very nature of true existence? They do not.

The four lines of, 'That magically [...] and so forth establish the pervasion of the reason of dependent arising. The next two and a half lines show the reason, and the next half is the example and the last line shows the thesis.

if one wishes study this more extensively, then one should study the great commentary on the Introduction.

As it explains here results *such as compositional factors or the sprout are seen to generate in proximity to their causes, which are respectively ignorance and the seed and the like. Any result refers to any type of result such as compositional factors, which is the second of the twelve links. The cause of compositional factors is ignorance, so ignorance precedes compositional factors in the list of the twelve links. Therefore ignorance is the cause of compositional factors, which is karma. The cause of any kind of sprout is a seed. The seed precedes the sprout and is therefore the cause. So just as the sprout is seen to generate in proximity to its cause, and compositional factors arise from the cause of ignorance, because they are artificial phenomena that are not generated if these causes do not exist, they are like a reflection of form. So how could they exist in the very nature of true existence?* The conclusion is that they are not truly existent.

The commentary explains that *the four lines of verse 143 – that magically generated by a magician and so forth – establish the pervasion of the reason of dependent arising. They show that whatever is a dependent arising definitely can't exist truly or inherently. That is the pervasive reasoning of dependent arising.*

The next two and a half lines of verse show the reason, and the next half is the example, where it talks about the artificial reflection being like an illusion. The last line shows the thesis, which is could they possess true reality if they do not exist? That is the reason that has been established.

Then the commentary concludes by saying that *if one wishes to understand this more extensively, then one should study the great commentary on the Introduction, by Lama Tsongkhapa.*

Another commentary on the *Bodhisattvacharyavatara* says that the reasoning of dependent arising is the most supreme of

all reasons as it presents the most succinct logic to establish the view of dependent arising. That is why it was established as the King of Reasonings by Lama Tsong Khapa and his sons, i.e. his main disciples.

Then there is also a quote from the *Madhyamakavatara*, which we have studied previously. You can refer to *Madhyamakavatara* teachings², which explain the syllogism. These are really profound explanations that establish the right view, which the view of emptiness. So it is very good to have a sound understanding of them.

Around the time when we were studying these points in the *Madhyamakavatara* text, His Holiness was visiting to Australia. I saw His Holiness just briefly, and he asked me: "What subjects are you teaching these days?" I mentioned that we were in the middle of the *Madhyamakavatara* teachings and that on another night I was teaching *The Thirty-Seven Practices of a Bodhisattva*. Then His Holiness actually put his palms together and said: "Oh, it's really incredible that these actually include both method and wisdom. That's incredibly good". I'm sure all of you would have also received a blessing when he put his palms together and made that comment.

We should really acknowledge our great fortune in being able to study such texts as these. Further on, the text also explains the great purpose that one can achieve through the understanding of emptiness. So keep this in mind!

The text will also explain the relationship between understanding emptiness in relation to oneself and helping others. As will be explained, understanding emptiness helps to overcome the eight worldly concerns, as well as gaining various ways and means to benefit other sentient beings.

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

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² See the teachings around 20 April 2004. The teachings on the five types of reasoning, specifically the four extremes of reasoning that have just been completed here, began on 15 April 2003.