

## Chapter 4 Critiquing the Buddhist Realists (Verses 4cd-15ab)

### Practicing Wisdom

#### Contemplating Impermanence

The Buddha said in sutra that the three realms of existence are impermanent, like lightning in the sky or like mirages. All the phenomena that exist in the three realms of existence, all things and events, have arisen merely through dependence on causes and conditions. Because of this, all things are transient; perishable and impermanent. In particular, the lives of sentient beings are like a torrential river, streaming with force, never stopping still for even a single moment. The lives of all sentient beings are devoid of certainty over any length of time; they are all perishable and transient. These passages point to one of the sixteen characteristics of the four noble truths: the first four are the characteristics of true suffering, and the first of these is impermanence.<sup>7</sup>

Noble Truth	Four Characteristics
1. Suffering (duḥkha)	Impermanence, Suffering, Emptiness, Selflessness
2. Origin (samudaya)	Cause, Origin, Strong Production, Condition
3. Cessation (nirodha)	Cessation, Pacification, Being Superb, Definite Emergence
4. Path (mārga)	Path, Awareness, Achievement, Deliverance

As I mentioned above, in the early development of our spiritual path, there are two stages. The first is restraining from negative actions, which are indicators of our deceived states of mind. As an initial counterforce to these, we should contemplate coarse impermanence. And to counteract our deceived states of mind and the misperception that underlies the negative actions, meditation on subtle impermanence is the main antidote and requires us to contemplate deeply the ever-changing, dynamic nature of reality. In this way we can combat the misperceptions, afflictive emotions, and deluded thoughts that persist in the mind.

It is obvious that the end of birth is death, and death is a phenomenon that no one desires. However, to adopt an attitude of denial and to simply avoid thinking about death is not a proper approach. Whether we like it or not, death is a fact of our existence, and there is no point denying its reality. The certainty of death cannot be revoked. It is a phenomenon that we all have to undergo sooner or later. If we compare people who deny death and simply won't think about it with people who cultivate a constant familiarity with the process of facing death directly, we will find a significantly different response in the face of death when it actually strikes. So when we think about the Buddha's emphasis on death and impermanence, we need not have the notion that Buddhism is some kind of pessimistic spiritual path that involves a morbid obsession with death. Rather, we are being encouraged here to make death familiar and to accept death as a natural fact of existence, so that when we encounter the actual moment of death, it does not come as a shock, as something unexpected, unnatural, and utterly overwhelming. If we face our death while we are still healthy, we will be able to maintain our equilibrium and so maintain a degree of calmness when the end nears. In this way, we will safeguard ourselves against unnecessary anxieties that are otherwise associated with death. Through the spiritual process, if we are fortunate, we will be able to arrive at a point where we will in fact be able to triumph over the anxieties of death, and transcend it.

#### Combating Our Persistent Discontent

In the scriptures we find mention of four types of maras,<sup>8</sup> or obstructive forces, that overwhelm living beings. The first of them is the mara of death, and the basis from which death occurs is our physical and mental aggregates, which constitute the second mara. The continuum of the mental aggregates carries on from one life into another, and the cause of this whole cycle is the various afflictive emotions and thoughts, which constitute the third mara. The key factor that enhances the power of these afflictions is attachment, which is the fourth mara. In Buddhism it is necessary for a spiritual trainee to develop a genuine wish to gain victory over the four maras. Once you develop a genuine desire to overcome them, you will naturally aspire to the path that leads to victory.

For a practitioner, what is involved here is to combat afflictive emotions and thoughts, the root cause of which is the fundamental ignorance; the grasping at things and events as intrinsically real. In order to be successful in this task it is important for the practitioner to engage in a spiritual path that is a combination of the three higher trainings; ethical discipline, concentration, and wisdom.

<sup>7</sup> See Advanced Glossary.

<sup>8</sup> Four maras to be overcome: 1. Death; 2. Mental Aggregates; 3. Continuum of mental aggregates from one life to another; 4. Attachment.

The first stage of a practice is therefore to maintain an ethically disciplined way of life, centred around the contemplation of impermanence. Unless our clinging to permanence is relaxed, we will not be able to successfully maintain an ethically disciplined way of life. So the crucial point here is to reflect on the transient nature of our existence. We are not talking about impermanence only in terms of death; rather we are referring to subtle impermanence, which is the moment-by-moment, ever-changing nature of all phenomena that reveals how things and events have no self-governing autonomy. All phenomena are governed by causes and conditions. This is especially true of our physical and mental aggregates, governed as they are by karma and afflictions.

So in the case of our conditioned existence, our fundamental misperception, or ignorance, is the governing cause. As long as we remain under the domination of this distorted state, we remain within samsaric bondage, and our existence will be characterised by dissatisfaction and suffering. Therefore this fundamental mis-knowing is the king of all our afflictive emotions and thoughts. Once we recognise this fact, we will realise that as long as we remain under the domination of this powerful ruler, there is no space in our minds for enduring peace and serenity, and we will develop a genuine desire, from the depths of our heart, to seek freedom and liberation from our bondage to ignorance.

Although we have an innate desire to seek happiness and overcome suffering, we find ourselves within an existence characterised by suffering and only fleeting happiness. Why do we find ourselves in such a state? It is due primarily to our fundamental ignorance. So what is required is to recognise this mis-knowing as being the root cause of our suffering.

**What is the process by which this ignorance can be dispelled?** Certainly, it is not by simply wishing for it to go away, nor by simply praying for it to happen. Nor is it by remaining in a non-conceptual, neutral state of mind. Only by developing an insight that sees through the illusion created by that distorted state of mind will we be in a position to dispel that ignorance. Therefore, after teaching on impermanence, the Buddha taught the nature of suffering, or unsatisfactoriness, which he then followed by his teaching on selflessness.

So now we have the following four characteristics of suffering. The first is impermanence, the realization of which leads to a deeper awareness of the second characteristic, unsatisfactoriness. The third characteristic is emptiness, and the fourth is the selflessness, or identitylessness, of persons, things, and events. There is a definite sequence to the realization of these four characteristics of suffering, beginning naturally with the understanding of the first characteristic.

It is by developing insight into emptiness that we counter the force of this fundamental ignorance, and this insight must be complemented by the methods of skilful means, such as compassion and the altruistic mind of awakening (*bodhichitta*). It is only through the combined force of these two factors (wisdom and method) that we will be able to totally eliminate not only the deluded mental states but also the instinctual habits formed by these afflictions. The object of such wisdom or insight is emptiness, and this emptiness is the main topic of Shantideva's ninth chapter.

## Commentary

### Refuting Appearances

Shantideva has already stated that the tenets and viewpoints of the lower schools of Buddhism are invalidated through reasoning by higher schools such as the Madhyamaka. In order, however, for such arguments to be successful, there must be commonly accepted analogies and examples.

4cd. For all employ the same comparisons,  
And the goal, if left unanalysed, they all accept.

Therefore here in verse 4, when Shantideva speaks of using commonly accepted comparisons and analogies, he is alluding to the fact that, even in everyday convention, certain phenomena are considered unreal or false. For example, there are those phenomena, such as dream objects and mirages, that we cannot find when searching for their reality. Here the Madhyamikas are using analogies that are considered false even in conventional terms to draw attention to the unreality of all phenomena. This draws our attention to the fact that all things and events are ultimately unfindable when we search for their essence.

Although at the initial stage it is through inference that we understand emptiness (through an intellectual process, by using reason, argument, and so on) ultimately this understanding must come at the level of a direct experience. In the scriptures, therefore, inferential knowledge is often compared to a blind person who can only get around with the help of a walking stick. Inferential cognition is not a direct experience; it is an approximation of that experience based on reasoning and critical reflection. However, at the initial stage, it is through inference that we can begin to understand emptiness, the ultimate nature of reality. Contemporary science, such as particle physics, has begun to point toward an understanding of the nature of reality wherein the very notion of objective reality is becoming increasingly untenable. These scientific insights have developed independently of Buddhism. So it seems that through following the conclusion of their own scientific premises, scientists in this field are arriving at a point where they are compelled to entertain the idea of the non-substantiality of things and events. Shantideva is stating in this text that

there are many grounds, reasons, and arguments that demonstrate the non-substantiality of things and events. In contrast, there is not a single premise that can substantiate the belief that things and events possess objective, intrinsic, or autonomous existence.

The fourth verse also alludes to the Realists' objection to the Madhyamaka thesis that things and events lack independent, intrinsic existence. Realists object on the grounds that if this is the case, then how can we maintain that through spiritual practice a person can attain the goal of liberation? The Sautrantika are raising the point here that, according to the Madhyamaka doctrine of emptiness, even causality would be negated.

The Madhyamikas respond to this by saying that the doctrine of emptiness does not deny causality. What is being denied is the validity of causal principles from the viewpoint of ultimate truth. On the conventional level the Madhyamikas argue that they retain the validity of the law of cause and effect. Because it is within the conventional framework (which the Madhyamikas accept without the need to analyse the ultimate nature of things, or without searching for the true referents behind language and concepts) it can simply be accepted as a valid part of the everyday conventional world. Within the framework of relative or conventional truth, they also accept the possibility of attaining, through spiritual practice, the goal of liberation and the state of buddhahood. Therefore, the Madhyamikas insist that their system does not reject causality.

Shantideva continues:

5. When ordinary folk perceive phenomena,  
They look on them as real and not illusory.  
This, then, is the subject of debate  
Where ordinary and meditators differ.

In this verse, Shantideva first presents the Realists' response to the Madhyamikas' defence by having the Realists state, "If you accept the validity of the conventional world, constituted by valid laws of cause and effect, I call that validity real and conclude that cause and effect possesses intrinsic existence. So where is the dispute between you and us? In fact, the dispute may be purely semantic." To this, the Madhyamikas respond, "That is not true. You Realists not only accept the validity of cause and effect at the conventional level, but you believe in the objective, intrinsic reality of these things and events, for you believe that things and events possess some kind of objective, independent status, that they exist in their own right." The Madhyamikas continue, "Although we accept that, to our deluded minds, things and events appear as if they have an autonomous and intrinsic reality and exist independently of our perception, we maintain that this is merely an illusion. We do not ascribe validity to that appearance. **We recognise a discrepancy between the way things exist and the way we perceive them to be.** That is why there is a dispute between you and us. We do not think this is simply a semantic disagreement."

The next verse begins:

6ab. Forms and so forth, which we sense directly,  
Exist by general acclaim, though logic disallows them.

What is common between the Realists and the Madhyamikas is the acceptance of the existence of forms, things, and events. What is being disputed, however, is whether forms and so on exist as they appear to exist. The Realists maintain that not only do forms and so on exist, but that they exist as they appear to us. They maintain that our perceptions of things and events are valid. As such, they argue, these things and events must possess objective, intrinsic reality.

To this, Madhyamikas say that although it is true that things and events, such as forms, are perceived by valid cognitions such as our sensory perceptions, that does not entail that these perceptions are valid in all aspects. They are valid in perceiving the objects, but they are delusory in **perceiving the objects to possess objective, independent, intrinsic existence.**

Therefore, according to the Madhyamikas, we can speak of two aspects of perception. From one point of view, it is valid; from another point of view, it is deceptive or deluded. From this understanding we can attribute two aspects to a single event of cognition. Just because we have valid, direct experiences of objects does not mean that these things and events experienced by us **possess objective, intrinsic existence.** It is in fact this very dispute that lies at the heart of the debate between Bhavaviveka and Chandrakirti that gave rise to the evolution of Madhyamaka-Svatantrika and Madhyamaka-Prasangika as two distinctive schools within the Madhyamaka school. **The debate between Bhavaviveka and Chandrakirti centres on the question of whether there are any commonly established objects between the Realists and the Madhyamikas, that is, objects that exist intrinsically and have self-nature.**

The verse continues:

6cd. They're false, deceiving, like polluted substances  
Regarded in the common view as clean.

The Realists respond: If there is no intrinsic reality or self-nature to things, if things and events do not possess objective, intrinsic existence, why is it that we all perceive it? They argue that there appears to be a common consensus that things are real, at least in so far as our perceptions are concerned. The Madhyamikas reply that a common consensus does not entail that something is true. For example, there

seems to be a consensus among ordinary people that the body is pure, while in reality it is polluted and impure, for it is composed of various impure elements. In this way the Madhyamikas defend their negation of intrinsic existence against the objections from the Realists. A key element of their defence is to demonstrate that the belief in intrinsic existence contradicts even our everyday valid experience.

Then, in the seventh verse, the Madhyamikas defend their philosophy of emptiness against objections that are based on citations from the Buddha's scriptures.

7abc. That he might instruct the worldly,  
Buddha spoke of "things," but these in truth  
Lack even momentariness.

The Realists object to the Madhyamaka view by arguing that the Buddha himself stated in his first public sermon that things and events not only exist, but they also possess defining characteristics such as momentariness, impermanence, and unsatisfactoriness. If forms and so on do not exist inherently, they contend, how can we maintain that they possess these characteristics?

The Madhyamikas respond by saying that **the main intention of the Buddha in giving such sermons (talking about the four noble truths and particularly talking about the characteristics of suffering in terms of the four characteristics such as impermanence) was purely to help sentient beings overcome their clinging to permanence and their attachment to samsaric existence. The ultimate aim of these teachings is to lead individuals to the full realization of emptiness. These teachings of the first sermon are, then, skilful means on the path leading to the realization of emptiness. Therefore, the teachings do not contradict the doctrine of emptiness.**

Next, Shantideva has the Realists raise a further objection to the Madhyamikas' negation of intrinsic existence. They argue that if things do not exist on the ultimate level, neither would they exist on the relative level. The debate then continues with the Madhyamaka response.

7d. "It's wrong to claim that this is relative!" If so you say,  
8. Then know that there's no fault.  
For momentariness is relative for meditators, but for the worldly, absolute.  
Were it otherwise, the common view  
Could fault our certain insight into corporeal impurity.

The gist of this response is that although, in reality, things and events are momentary and transient, in our everyday view of the world we tend to perceive them as enduring or permanent. However, this is not sufficient to invalidate the fact that things and events are transient and perishable. So there is no inconsistency for the Madhyamika in maintaining the position that things and events are, at the relative level, impermanent, while in the ultimate sense they do not possess this characteristic.

If anything that contradicts our commonsense view is said to be invalid, then the meditative insight into our body as being impure (in the sense of being composed of impure substances such as blood, bones, and flesh) would also become invalid. For in our everyday perceptions we often feel attracted to a beautiful body, experiencing an underlying grasping for it as desirable, perfect, and in some sense pure.

### **Merit and Rebirth**

Next, the Realists level the charge that from the Madhyamaka viewpoint, accumulation of merit becomes impossible.

9ab. "Through a buddha, who is but illusion, how does merit spring?"  
As if the Buddha were existing truly.

Here the Realists argue that, according to the Madhyamikas, even the buddhas are illusion-like and therefore not ultimately real. If this is so, they argue, how can we maintain that by venerating objects of refuge, such as the buddhas, we can accumulate merit? To this, the Madhyamikas respond by saying that just as the Realists believe that **revering an intrinsically real Buddha accumulates intrinsically real merits, similarly, in our system we can say venerating an illusion-like Buddha accumulates illusion-like merit. There is no inconsistency. So our rejection of intrinsic existence does not negate the possibility of accumulating merit.**

The Realists raise another objection:

9cd. "But," you ask, "if beings likewise are illusions,  
How, when dying, can they take rebirth?"

They argue that according to the Madhyamaka philosophy of emptiness (which denies true existence and posits existence only in nominal terms) **the idea of rebirth becomes untenable, because all sentient beings would also be illusion-like. How can an illusory sentient being take rebirth after death?**

To this, the Madhyamikas respond by saying that not only is it possible, but your analogy actually confirms it.

10. As long as the conditions are assembled,  
Illusions, likewise, will persist and manifest.  
Why, through simply being more protracted,

Should sentient beings be regarded as more real?

Even illusion comes into being only in dependence on causes and conditions. Once causes and conditions aggregate, then the result, in this case the illusion, arises. If there is no coming together of causes and conditions, even something like an illusion will not arise. Similarly, as long as there exist within the mindstream the relevant causes and conditions for taking rebirth, this will lead naturally to rebirth after death. So there is no incompatibility between upholding the theory of rebirth on the one hand and maintaining the doctrine of emptiness on the other.

### **Good and Evil**

In verses 11 and 12, the Realists pose the question, “If everything is devoid of intrinsic existence, what grounds are there to distinguish good from evil?”

11. If thus I were to slay or harm a mere mirage,  
Because there is no mind, no sin occurs.  
But beings are possessed of mirage-like minds;  
Sin and merit will, in consequence, arise.

12. Spells and incantations cannot, it is true,  
Give mind to mirages, and so no mind arises.  
But illusions spring from various causes;  
The kinds of mirage, then, are likewise various—

13a. A single cause for everything there never was!

If all sentient beings are like mirages or illusions, then there would not be any negative karma accumulated by killing living beings. So, just as by killing magically created illusions we do not accumulate negative karma, according to you Madhyamikas there will not be any negative karma for killing beings, who are like illusions.

Shantideva responds to this objection by stating that there is a significant difference between these two situations. The creations of spells and incantations do not have consciousness. They have no capacity for feeling pain and pleasure; they are mere illusions. So, naturally, **slaying a magically created person will not accrue negative karma. In the case of illusion-like sentient beings, however, although they are unreal in that they do not have intrinsic existence, yet they possess the capacity to feel pain and pleasure. They are sentient beings. So slaying an illusion-like sentient being will definitely accrue illusion-like negative karma.** There is then a qualitative difference between these two situations.

### **Samsara and Nirvana**

Next, the Madhyamikas answer the accusation that, according to their philosophy of emptiness, no discrimination could be made between samsara and nirvana.

13bcd. “If, ultimately,” you will now inquire,  
“Everything is said to be nirvana,  
Samsara, which is relative, must be the same.

14. “Therefore even buddhahood reverts to the samsaric state.  
So why,” you ask, “pursue the bodhisattva path?”  
As long as there’s no cutting of the causal stream,  
There is no routing of illusionary appearance.

15ab. But when the causal stream is interrupted,  
All illusions, even relative, will cease.

Here, the Realists state that according to the Madhyamikas, all phenomena lack intrinsic existence and that this absence of intrinsic existence is said to be nirvana: If you Madhyamikas call this absence nirvana, then nirvana becomes identical with samsara, because samsara is also devoid of intrinsic existence. If this is so, then according to you Madhyamikas, even samsara becomes nirvana. This cannot be the case, for samsara and nirvana are different. In fact, they are incompatible. Furthermore, if samsara and nirvana are indistinguishable, one will be compelled to accept that even the buddhas remain within the bondage of samsara. Why, then, should spiritual aspirants begin the path in an endeavour to attain the state of buddhahood or liberation when, according to you, samsara and nirvana are ultimately one?

Shantideva responds to this by stating that the **Realists have confused the cessation of intrinsic existence, which is a natural nirvana, with nirvana attained through a process of spiritual perfection.** Furthermore, **cessation is not only an absence of intrinsic existence, it is also a cessation of all our obscurations; both our afflictive emotions and our habitual predispositions.** Therefore, **we must distinguish between natural nirvana (emptiness) and the meditatively attained nirvana.** These are two distinct facts. And as long as the causal stream that leads to a perpetual existence within samsara is not terminated, the individual will remain within samsaric bondage. Once that causal chain is cut, then the individual will not only be in the state of natural nirvana, he or she will also have actualised the nirvana that is freedom from suffering and bondage.

The point being made here by **the Realists is that without accepting the intrinsic and objective reality of things, there would be no causality, no way that phenomena could function.** To all of these objections, **the Madhyamikas respond by stating that, although they maintain that all things and events are illusion-like in that they do not have intrinsic, independent reality, they do accept the validity of causality and other functions of the relative world. The Madhyamikas state that the reality of the conventional world is not destroyed by their logic of emptiness but is left completely intact.**

**So, in the aftermath of negating intrinsic existence, what is crucial is to be able to maintain the validity of the world of conventional truth. If we are able to do this, we will arrive at the true “Middle Way,” a position free from the extremes of absolutism and nihilism. And because this position does not negate the reality and validity of the conventional world, it retains all functionality, such as cause and effect, subject and object, and so on. Once we arrive at this viewpoint, then we have definitely earned the hallmark of being a person within the true Middle Way. Otherwise, our philosophical position falls into one of the two extremes. Either it negates the reality of the conventional world and descends further and further into a nihilistic position, or it swings to the other extreme and upholds some form of absolutism, grasping for something absolute or eternal. According to Shantideva and the Madhyamikas, it is crucial for a spiritual trainee to be able to maintain the balance of the Middle Way position.**

### **Meditation**

*Take a moment now to do another brief meditation. The theme of this meditation is subtle impermanence. First, reflect upon your own body, particularly on the circulation of blood. How does the heart pump the blood? If you reflect on that, you experience that there is something dynamic about your body; it never remains in a static state. And if you reflect upon external objects, you observe the same phenomenon. For example, when you see a historic building, you might reflect, “This house is several centuries old.” Even while maintaining its continuum in time, however, the house has been going through a process of moment-to-moment change all the while.*

*Reflect upon this subtle impermanence, this dynamic process, this momentary, ever-changing nature of phenomena. This is not confined to external objects; it extends also to our mindstream. Although there is a continuum, if we reflect upon individual instances of our cognitive events (the emotions, thoughts, and mental states that we have) we will find that they are all momentarily changing. They never remain still. So reflect upon this moment-to-moment, changing, and dynamic nature of internal and external phenomena. This, in brief, is how you can contemplate the subtle impermanence of all things and events.*