

Chapter 5 The Mind-Only Viewpoint (Verses 15c to 39)

Commentary

The External World

We are now at the section that is specifically concerned with refuting the views of the Mind-Only, or *Chittamatra*, school. First, Shantideva has the Mind-Only school present its theses, which are then followed by his refutations from the Madhyamaka position. In the text the Mind-Only view is stated as a question:

15cd. “If that which is deceived does not exist,
What is it,” you ask, “that sees illusion?”

The objection is that if, as the Madhyamikas contend, all phenomena are like illusions, then conceptions, perceptions, and consciousness must also be illusion-like. If this is so, they ask, what is it that perceives the illusions?

Among the four Buddhist schools of thought, there are two Hinayana schools (Sautrantika and Vaibhashika) and two Mahayana schools (Chittamatra and Madhyamaka). Both Mahayana schools accept the selflessness of phenomena. However, their understanding of what constitutes the meaning of this selflessness differs between the Mind-Only school and the Middle Way school.

This objection of the Mind-Only school is refuted in various ways by the Madhyamikas. **One refutation is based on drawing parallels.** The Mind-Only school understands reality in terms of what are known as the three natures. These are the *dependent nature*, the *imputed nature*, and the *thoroughly established or ultimate nature*. It is within this framework that the Mind-Only speaks of the selflessness of phenomena. The self, or the identity to be negated, in their understanding of the selflessness of phenomena, pertains primarily to **the way in which language and concepts relate to their referents, or objects.** For example, they argue that forms or everyday objects such as vases, pillars, and tables do not exist in their own right as the basis for terms. In this view, all external phenomena are, in the final analysis, projections of the mind; they are ultimately extensions of the mind. In this sense, **the Mind-Only school rejects the reality of the external world. They contend that if we carefully examine everyday objects such as vases and tables, they appear to us to have some kind of independent status (as if they exist “out there”) while in reality, everyday objects are nothing but extensions of our mind. They are projections, or constructions, arising from within our mind, and they do not have an independent, objective reality outside. Once you appreciate the lack of reality of the external world in this way, there is certainly a marked decrease in your tendency to grasp onto the perceived solidity of the external world. So the central thesis of the Mind-Only school (which is being refuted by Shantideva) is that the external world is illusory, and the perceptions we have of external objects are projections constructed by the mind due to predispositions that are deeply embedded in the mind.**

In the next verse, **Shantideva states that, according to the Mind-Only school, even the reality of the external world cannot be maintained.**

16. But, if for you, these same illusions have no being,
What, indeed, remains to be perceived?
If objects have another mode of being,
That very mode is but the mind itself.

By upholding that external objects do not really exist and that they are mere projections of the mind, the Mind-Only school is accepting a certain degree of discrepancy between our perceptions and the reality of the external world. If this is so, the Madhyamikas argue, then **the Mind-Only already accepts the illusion-like nature of reality at least in so far as the external world is concerned. They would therefore have to accept that external objects do not possess true, or intrinsic, existence; they have no real ontological status. Even the Mind-Only would have to deny the reality of illusion itself.**

The Self-Cognizing Mind

The Mind-Only may respond to this by stating that although external objects do not exist the way we perceive them (as enjoying autonomous, objective reality) this does not entail that they do not exist as expressions of the mind. Although they do not exist independently, they can be said to exist as mental phenomena. That is a feasible defence by the Mind-Only school. However, this is contested by the Madhyamikas in the next verse:

17. But if the mirage is the mind itself,
What, then, is perceived by what?
The Guardian of the World himself has said
That mind cannot be seen by mind.

They argue that if the mirage-like external objects are mere extensions of the mind, then in reality they are part of the mind. If this is so, **the Mind-Only will be compelled to maintain that, when mind per-**

ceives external objects, what is happening is that the mind is perceiving mind. How can we coherently speak of subjects and objects in a situation where, after all, there is nothing but mind itself?

In the next two lines, **Shantideva cites a sutra in which the Buddha states that no matter how sharp a blade is, it cannot cut itself.**

18. In just the same way, he has said,
The sword's edge cannot cut the sword.
"But," you say, "it's like the flame
That perfectly illuminates itself."

Similarly, **a consciousness can never perceive itself.** He is stating that **the concept of self-cognizing consciousness is untenable.** The Mind-Only school responds to this critique by defending that it is possible to conceive a mind cognizing itself. They use the analogy of a lamp. Just as a lamp can illuminate other objects because its nature is self-luminous, the consciousness too cognises other objects because it is self-cognizing. The Madhyamikas do not accept this explanation and respond:

19ab. The flame, in fact, can never light (illuminate) itself.
And why? Because the darkness never dims it!

The Mind-Only response is to invoke another analogy:

19cd. "The blueness of a blue thing," you will say,
"Depends, unlike a crystal, on no other thing."
20ab. "Likewise some perceptions
Rise from other things, while some do not."

They argue that we can differentiate two different types of blue. For example, if a clear crystal is placed on a blue cloth, it will assume a bluish colour. However, this blueness is derived from other factors; the presence of the blue cloth underneath it. In contrast, there are blue precious stones in which the blueness is not derived from other factors. So, in the second instance, the quality of blueness is an essential property, while in the first, it is contingent. Similarly, they argue, there are two principal kinds of cognitive events. The first is our sensory perceptions, which take on external objects. The second kind do not take on external objects but perceive cognition itself. So the Mind-Only school distinguishes between self-cognizers and cognizers of other objects. This defence by the Mind-Only is refuted by Shantideva:

20cd. But what is blue has never of itself imposed
A blueness on its non-blue self.

He argues that there is no quality of blueness that is not dependent on other factors. Blueness is a quality of a thing, and all things and events must depend on other causes and conditions for their coming into being. Just as the blueness of the crystal is dependent on other factors, the blueness of lapis lazuli is also dependent on other conditions. Shantideva continues:

21. The phrase "the lamp illuminates itself"
The mind can know and formulate.
But what is there to know and say
That "mind is self-illuminating"?
22. The mind, indeed, is never seen by anyone,
And therefore, whether it can know or cannot know itself,
Just like the beauty of a barren woman's daughter,
This merely forms the subject of a pointless conversation.

The Mind-Only has to admit that a lamp does not illuminate itself, for if this were the case, we would be compelled to maintain that darkness too conceals itself. Yet, without subscribing to the view that a lamp is self-illuminating, we can still maintain that the lamp is illuminating. And just as a lamp is not self-illuminating, the Madhyamikas argue, then the fact that cognitions do not cognise themselves does not entail that cognitions are not by their very nature cognizing.

Shantideva argues that even the very act of illumination is dependent on other factors; there cannot be illumination without something that is illuminated. Similarly, there cannot be a cognition without an object. It would be like speaking about the daughter of a barren woman!

However, the Mind-Only school presents an argument to prove the self-knowing, or apperceptive, quality of perception:

23ab. "But if," you ask, "the mind is not self-knowing,
How does it remember what it knew?"

Generally speaking, **the criterion by which we determine whether something exists is whether it can be established by a valid cognition.** If any thing or event can be established by a valid cognition, it can be said to exist. So the reality of a phenomenon depends on the validity of the perception or cognition. Yet, the validity of the cognition depends in turn upon its relation to reality; so there is a relationship of mutual dependence between cognitions and their objects. Without an object there cannot be a subject, and no cognition or awareness.

However, the Mind-Only school does not accept this mutual dependence between cognition and its object. **According to their view, some privileged status is accorded to consciousness, or subject, because the subjective experience certifies the reality of the objects. However, the reality of the subject must also be certified. In other words, the cognition or subject too must be cognized. If every cognition requires another instance of cognition for its establishment, then the chain would extend *ad infinitum*.** Therefore, the Mind-Only argues, we have to maintain that cognition must necessarily cognize itself; ie, there must be a self-knowing faculty to our cognitive events that allows our cognitions to perceive themselves.

For these reasons, the Mind-Only school accepts a self-cognizing faculty of consciousness (*rang rik*). Their argument is based upon the premise of recollection, that when we are remembering, we are not only remembering the object but also recalling our perception of that object. This indicates, according to them, that when we initially perceived that object, there must have been a further faculty that registered our experience. The Mind-Only argues that, just as in ordinary language we cannot speak of recollection without a prior perception of an object or an event, similarly, we cannot speak of the recollection of an experience without a prior perception of that experience. Thus, they conclude, there must have been a self-perceiving awareness at the time we initially perceived the object.

Shantideva gives an alternative account of recollection:

23cd. We say that like the poison of the water rat,
It's from the link with outer things that memory occurs.

From the viewpoint of the Madhyamika, equal power is given to both subject and object, because the subject and object are mutually dependent. That is to say, each depends on the other and derives its validity on the basis of the other. The Madhyamika therefore does not accord any privileged status to the consciousness.

Khunu Lama Rinpoche states that when you perceive, say, a blue colour through sensory perception and later recollect your perception, the very act of recollecting the object is mixed with the recollection of the perception. Recollection of an object can never arise independently of the experience of that object. It is because of this that the subjective experience is also recalled when we recall the object. There is no need to posit an independent, self-perceiving faculty to account for recollection.

Then the Mind-Only school presents another argument in their defence of self-cognition.

24. "In certain cases," you will say, "the mind
Can see the minds of others, how then not itself?"
But through the application of a magic balm,
The eye may see the treasure, but the salve it does not see.

They argue that, through deep meditative absorption, it is possible for certain individuals to acquire a clairvoyance that allows them to perceive other people's minds. The mind must therefore have the capacity to perceive what is even closer and more familiar; itself.

Madhyamikas respond to this with a different analogy. They argue that although the use of magical powers and substances may make it possible for individuals to perceive objects buried beneath the ground, that still does not provide that person's eye with the power to perceive itself. Similarly, they argue, **just because a mind can perceive others' minds does not entail that it can also perceive itself.**

According to the Mind-Only school, if we do not accept this faculty of self-cognition, we deprive ourselves of the grounds to establish the validity of consciousness. So Shantideva reiterates that we are not negating sights, sounds, and cognitions:

25. It's not indeed our object to disprove
Experiences of sight or sound or knowing.
Our aim is here to undermine the cause of sorrow:
The thought that such phenomena have true existence.

We are negating our misperception of the things we see, hear, and know as being intrinsically real, for this misperception is the root cause of our suffering.

Seeing Through Self-Grasping

To understand how this fundamental ignorance (grasping at intrinsic existence) lies at the root of our bondage, it is important to have some understanding of the psychological and phenomenological process entailed when afflictions arise within us. When we experience these negative emotions arising (such as anger, hatred, and attachment), we should examine how the objects of our emotions appear to us, that is, how we perceive them. In our normal interactions with the world, we perceive things as enjoying an objective, independent status, existing "out there"; this is because we tend to relate to the world through our dualistic perceptions. We tend to go along with our perceptions, grasping at the images they present to us, as if they possess some objective, intrinsic reality. This is especially true when we are in the midst of strong emotions.

For example, when we are experiencing a strong desire for someone or something, at that instant the object of our attraction appears as if it is one hundred percent perfect and desirable. That desirability appears to exist independently of our perception. Similarly, when we experience intense anger or hatred, the object of our anger appears as if it actually possesses this hatefulness independently of our perception. There is a tendency in us to look at things in black-and-white terms when caught up in strong emotions, perceiving things to be either one hundred percent good or one hundred percent bad. During these occasions, we should really try to discern how we are actually relating to the world, and how our misperception of things and events as being intrinsically real distorts our interactions with the world around us.

When we carefully analyse these intense emotions, such as anger, attachment, and jealousy, we will discover a strong sense of “I” or self at the core their causal processes. Feelings such as “I don’t want this,” “I am repulsed by it,” or “I feel drawn to it,” underlie our emotional experience. How are we to relate to and counter this strong sense of “I”? Analysis is one step. Another step in countering these afflictions is to try to reduce the force of our grasping at the concreteness of the object of our emotions.

Take the example of your attitude toward a valued possession, like your car, or your watch. If you have strong attachment to watches, for instance, try to recall how you reacted to your watch before you bought it (when it was still in the shop, on the shelf) and compare your feelings about it after you bought it. Now that it is “yours,” the watch becomes associated with your ego-consciousness, “I am.” In the shop, there was certainly an attraction toward it, but there was less association with your sense of self because it did not “belong” to you. So, here we can observe how we feel differently about the same object.

Generally speaking, emotions such as anger and attachment come in different degrees. These degrees correspond to the amount of grasping onto a sense of self or the thought, “I am.” At a gross level we tend to conceive the self as an entity independent of our body and mind, in the manner of a controller, possessing some kind of self-sufficient, autonomous reality. Grasping at this sense of self is quite instinctual. For example, if it were necessary and we felt we would benefit, we would find it perfectly acceptable to use medical science to have a heart transplant or have a limb amputated. Were it possible, we would be willing to even exchange our body for a different one if this contributed to our well-being. Similarly, if we felt we would be better off for the exchange; might we also be prepared to exchange even our mind? Such a willingness indicates that we do have a belief in a sense of a self that is quite independent of our body and mind. What Shantideva has been demonstrating here in the text is the absence of such a self. According to him, the self, or person, exists only on the basis of the aggregates.⁹ Apart from the body and mind, there is no such entity called the “self.”

The point of this is that once you reflect on this absence of selfhood, there will definitely be a corresponding decrease in your grasping at such a self; leading to a marked loosening of your grip on a rigid sense of a self or ego. I mentioned above that if you view all external objects as projections of the mind (as something created by your own deluded mind) this brings a marked decrease in your attachment toward external objects. In the same manner, as you begin to recognise the absence of this independent, autonomous self, your instinctive grasping at such a self will begin to loosen.

Illusion and Mind

Next Shantideva presents another thesis of the Mind-Only school.

26. “Illusions are not other than the mind,” you say,
And yet you also claim that they are not the same.
But must they not be different if the mind is real?
And how can mind be real if there’s no difference?

This is the assertion that an illusion is neither different from the mind nor identical to it; illusion is not the mind itself. Since illusion is neither identical nor separate, it must be a projection of the mind.

Shantideva argues that if illusion exists externally, how can the Mind-Only assert that it is a mere projection of the mind? On the other hand, if illusion does not possess any external reality, then the illusion becomes a mere creation of the mind, in which case, how can the Mind-Only maintain that everyday ob-

⁹ **Aggregates.** (see also **Buddhist Glossary Advanced**)

1. **Form (rūpa)** in general refers to objects apprehended by our sense consciousnesses; colours, shapes, sounds, odours, tastes, and tangibles. As noted above, it also includes forms for mental consciousness. When speaking of the five aggregates that constitute a person, the form aggregate refers to the body.
2. **Feeling (vedanā)** is the mental factor of the experience of pleasure, pain, or neutrality.
3. **Discrimination (saṃjñā)** is the mental factor that apprehends the distinctive characteristics of an object and can distinguish one thing from another.
4. **Miscellaneous factors (saṃskāra)** are mental factors other than feeling and discrimination, such as emotions, attitudes, and views, as well as abstract composites such as karmic seeds and latencies of afflictions.
5. **Primary consciousnesses (vijñāna)** consist of the visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, tactile, and mental primary consciousnesses that apprehend the general type of object. Visual primary consciousness apprehends colours and shapes, auditory primary consciousness apprehends sounds, olfactory primary consciousness apprehends smells, gustatory primary consciousness apprehends tastes, tactile primary consciousness apprehends tangibles, and mental primary consciousnesses know mental phenomena.

jects like forms, tables, and vases actually exist? They cannot be real in any sense from the Mind-Only point of view.

However, the Mind-Only adherents maintain that although external objects are like mirages and do not exist, they can still be observed.

27. “A mirage may be known,” you say, “though lacking true existence.”
The knower is the same: it knows but is a mirage.
“But what supports samsara must be real,” you say,
“Or else samsara is like empty space.”

Shantideva responds that likewise, although mind does not exist from the perspective of ultimate truth, we can still maintain that mind is observable. To this, the Mind-Only school replies that cyclic existence must have some objective, substantial basis in reality; otherwise it would be like the empty space, which for them is a mere conceptual abstraction. The Mind-Only, while viewing space as an abstract entity, still maintain that it must have some substantial basis in reality. Shantideva then reiterates that, from the Mind-Only view, only mind enjoys real existence.

28. But how could the unreal proceed to function,
Even if it rests on something real?
This mind of yours is isolated and alone,
Alone, in solitude, and unaccompanied.
29. If the mind indeed is free of objects,
All beings must be buddhas, thus gone and enlightened.
Therefore what utility or purpose can there be
In saying thus, that there is “only mind?”

Therefore the Mind-Only are compelled by their own logic to accept that mind exists independently of all objects for, ultimately, it is only the mind that exists. If this is so, then this resembles the dharmakaya state, in which all thought processes of the external world have been dissolved and no dualistic appearances remain.

In the end, the Mind-Only will have to accept that since nothing exists apart from mind, the mind must be free of all dualistic elaborations. This is because all forms of duality are mere illusions and therefore do not exist. This further implies that all sentient beings, possessing minds as they do, are buddhas, fully enlightened and free of delusions and dualistic perceptions. In this way, Shantideva demonstrates that the Mind-Only school's view results in absurd conclusions.

The Middle Way Approach

Now Shantideva begins the discussion of the necessity of the Middle Way path. First, he presents an objection to the Madhyamaka position on the emptiness of intrinsic existence:

30. Even if we know that all is like illusion,
How will this dispel afflictive passion?
Magicians may indeed desire
The mirage-women they themselves create.

Shantideva responds to this criticism in the following verse:

31. The reason is they have not rid themselves
Of habits of desiring objects of perception;
And when they gaze upon such things,
Their aptitude for emptiness is weak indeed.

Shantideva agrees it is true that even a magician (creator of an illusory woman) sometimes has lustful feelings, even though he knows that she is a mere illusion. Shantideva says this is due to his habitual inclinations and patterns of thought. Similarly, even after understanding the illusion-like, empty nature of phenomena, we too have the habitual tendency to grasp at things and events as if they were intrinsically real. This is because of instinctual habits formed over many lifetimes.

When we speak of seeds or propensities here, it is critical to recognise that there are primarily two different types. The first are propensities or imprints in the form of potential, which can manifest later in consciousness in more overt forms. The other types are not so much potentials as tendencies, which remain as habitual patterns, influencing our perceptions and attitudes.

Shantideva states that **by developing constant familiarity with our insight into emptiness, we gradually overcome the effects of these powerful habitual instincts. Once we have gained deep insight into emptiness (negating grasping to all extremes) then all dualistic tendencies and grasping will cease. Then, through constant familiarity and development of that profound insight, we gradually overcome even the habitual inclination to grasp at intrinsic existence.**

What is essential is for us to get at the root and realise subtle emptiness, as this negates all degrees of substantial and intrinsic reality. It is vital that our realization of emptiness does not remain incomplete, like the understanding of the Mind-Only school. That understanding negates the reality

of the external world, but it still asserts that mind, or consciousness, enjoys some kind of absolute reality. There is thus still a powerful basis for grasping, for our understanding of emptiness has not reached its full scope.

Compared to the Mind-Only position, the Svatantrika-Madhyamaka school takes a further step by asserting that neither mind nor external objects possess substantial existence. However, they still accept some subtle form of intrinsic reality of both mind and its object, thus their understanding of emptiness is not final either.

In the case of the Prasangika-Madhyamaka understanding of emptiness, since all intrinsic reality has been negated, this deep insight into emptiness is complete and final and demolishes all tendencies for grasping at anything as absolute. This then is the true understanding of emptiness that we must cultivate.

Shantideva issues a caution for us in the next verse.

32. By training in this aptitude for emptiness,
The habit to perceive substantiality will fade.
By training in the view that all lacks entity,
This view itself will also disappear.

What is emphasised here is to **be critically aware of the danger of reifying¹⁰ emptiness itself. You might conclude that although all things and events are empty of intrinsic existence, emptiness itself is absolute.** Shantideva states that when our view of emptiness is perfect, even the tendency to reify emptiness and conceive it as some kind of an absolute will be dispelled. Although there is a slight difference in the interpretation of this point between Khenpo Künpal and Minyak Künsö's commentaries, ultimately they converge on the same point; **the need to develop a complete realization of emptiness so that it frees us from grasping even emptiness as truly existent.**

In the next two verses, Shantideva shows that, by meditating on emptiness, we can attain a non-conceptual state.

33. "There is nothing" — when this is asserted,
No "thing" is there to be examined.
For how can nothing, lacking all support,
Remain before the mind as something present?
34. When real and non-real both
Are absent from before the mind,
Nothing else remains for mind to do
But rest in perfect peace, from concepts free.

Shantideva states that, as a Madhyamika, he accepts the validity of all conventionalities (such as the law of cause and effect and the possibility of attaining liberation) within the relative framework. Within their framework of true existence of things and events, realists also speak of the path and the possibility of attaining full liberation. **Shantideva argues that, while maintaining that ultimately all things are unreal and do not enjoy intrinsic existence, we can still speak coherently of the possibility of attaining buddhahood.** He makes this point in the following verses:

35. As the wishing jewel and tree of miracles
Fulfil and satisfy all hopes and wishes,
Likewise, through their prayers for those who might be trained,
Victorious ones appear within the world.
36. The healing shrine of the garuda,
Even when its builder was long dead,
Continued even ages thence
To remedy and soothe all plagues and venom.
37. Likewise, though the bodhisattva has transcended sorrow,
By virtue of his actions for the sake of buddhahood,
The shrines of buddha forms appear and manifest,
Enacting and fulfilling every deed.

Then Shantideva has his adversary raise the question:

38ab. "But how," you ask, "can offerings made
To beings freed from all discursiveness give fruit?"

And he answers:

38cd. It's said that whether buddhas live or pass beyond,
The offerings made to them have equal merit.

¹⁰ Reify make something that is abstract more concrete or real. Here, making 'emptiness' concrete or real.

39. Whether you assert the relative or ultimate,
The scriptures say that merit will result.
Merits will be gained regardless
Of the Buddha's true or relative existence.

Meditation

Now do a brief meditation. Imagine you are experiencing an intense emotion, such as anger or attachment, toward someone. Then imagine how, caught up in the emotion, you would respond in a scenario involving that person. Analyse how you relate to the object of your anger or attachment, and compare this with how you relate to people in your normal state of mind. Look at the differences between these two scenarios and compare them. This way, you will learn to recognise the psychological process involved in a forceful affliction, such as anger, and appreciate how grasping at some reified qualities of the person lies at the root of an afflictive emotions.