

Chapter 6 The Authenticity of the Mahayana (verses 40 - 43)

Practicing Wisdom

Creating the Causes for Happiness

Chandrakirti states in his *Supplement to the Middle Way* that **the entire world of sentient beings and their environments is a result of causes and conditions**. He is referring specifically to the causes and conditions that constitute the karma of sentient beings. **Each individual comes into being and each disintegrates and ceases to exist, and if we trace the continuum of the causes and conditions themselves, we find that basically it comes down to karma, whether positive or negative. Karma itself is rooted in intention and motivation, so in effect it all comes down to the individual's state of mind. From a disciplined and calm state of mind, desirable and positive consequences follow, and from an undisciplined, negative motivation and state of mind, undesirable experiences of pain and suffering follow.** Because of this, the Buddha stated in various sutras that **the mind is the creator of all sentient beings and of samsara; this applies also to nirvana**. So, **in a sense, the mind is the creator of both samsara and nirvana**.

All individuals are equal in that every one of us instinctively seeks happiness and avoids suffering. The way to fulfil this aspiration is through seeking out the actual causes and conditions that develop and enhance our happiness and eliminating the factors that cause suffering and pain. This is the true essence of Dharma practice.

The immediate state of our mind (happy, irritated, or otherwise) depends of course on many factors, including physical conditions such as exhaustion or relaxation. However, many of our thought processes do not depend primarily on physiological conditions. So, **ultimately it is by bringing about an internal transformation that we can effect the desired change in our state of mind**.

When we speak of the mind or consciousness, we should not have the notion that we are talking about a monolithic entity. Just as there are many different types of matter, there are also many different types of consciousness comprising our inner world; there are diverse dispositions, mental states, thought processes, and so on. **In the case of external, material objects, we recognise that some are beneficial and some are harmful, and based on our discrimination, we avoid contact with harmful substances while utilising and developing the potential of the positive ones.** Similarly, in the case of our inner world (by choosing from among the variety of our mental states) we can enhance the capacity and potential of those states of mind that will create both an immediate sense of serenity, and will also give rise to happier, more positive, and calmer states of mind in the future.

When certain kinds of thoughts and emotions arise, they immediately cause a disturbance, afflicting our mind and creating a negative atmosphere. Even among those thoughts and emotions that initially provide a sense of happiness or pleasure, some may in the long run actually be destructive. Therefore it is **crucial to correctly distinguish between mental states that are harmful and those that are truly beneficial**.

Among those that are beneficial, we must distinguish between long-term and short-term beneficial effects. When these two criteria come into conflict, we should regard those with long-term consequences as more important. Some states of mind initially create irritation, unhappiness, or a lack of joy. However, by staying calm and facing them (going through the various challenges they provide) it is possible for these situations to eventually produce happier and more stable states of mind. **So it is important to be able to compare long-term and short-term consequences. With such discernment we can develop those positive states of mind that produce long-term beneficial effects.**

When we speak of which actions and states of mind need to be enhanced and which need to be discarded, we must choose and pursue the task intelligently. The faculty that generates this discernment is called *discriminating awareness*. This is, in fact, one of the distinguishing features of being human. Although all sentient beings are equal in having the instinctive wish to be happy and overcome suffering, human beings have a greater capacity to think in terms of long-term and short-term consequences. Because of this, human beings have a greater imaginative faculty and therefore a greater capacity to fulfil their aspiration to seek happiness and to avoid suffering.

Among the various types of discriminating awareness, the most important is the one that penetrates the ultimate nature of reality; the realization of emptiness. There are many factors we can use to develop this wisdom, including, most importantly, the study of the scriptures that outline the philosophy of emptiness. This is what we are doing here in this book.

Two Intellectual Cultures

Generally speaking, we can say that **in the East philosophers have paid more attention to understanding the nature of the internal world. This is particularly the case within the Buddhist tradition.** The Western scientific tradition generally seems to place greater emphasis on the investigation of the external world. Because of this we can speak of the East and the West in terms of two distinct intellectual cultures, where the emphasis differs regarding the exploration of the internal and external worlds. As human beings, we need both.

In the East, although there is science and technology, they are not fully developed and remain in an early stage. Similarly, in the West there are various disciplines of psychology, but because the intellectual culture emphasises the exploration of the external world, the discipline of psychology remains in an early stage. Therefore, just as we need more scientific and technological development in the East, in the West there is a need to further develop the understanding of mind, consciousness, and self.

Because of this, there are quite a few Westerners who take an academic interest in Eastern religions. This interest stems not so much from seeking a personal spiritual path, but rather as an investigation of something that is an object of intellectual curiosity. I think this is very healthy, because by studying others' viewpoints, it is possible for us to discover new and refreshing perspectives on the world; including our own life.

Commentary

Mahayana Authenticity and Emptiness

We continue now with our root text, starting from verse 40. It is the beginning of a subsection in which **Shantideva talks about the necessity of realising emptiness even to gain liberation from samsaric existence as opposed to full enlightenment.** With regard to the reading of these verses, the two Tibetan commentaries differ, and this difference in turn leads to a divergence in the way the root text is divided into sections.

Khenpo Künpal states in his commentary that from this point onward, the main emphasis is to prove the validity or authenticity of the Mahayana scriptures. In contrast, **Minyak Künsö's commentary says that the emphasis is on proving the thesis that, even in order to gain liberation from samsara, the realization of emptiness is indispensable.** Given that they perceive different points of emphasis, there will of course also be differences of interpretation.

First, an opening argument is presented concerning the Madhyamaka school's great emphasis on the realization of emptiness. Here Shantideva has his opponent ask, "since it is possible to attain liberation from samsara by meditating on and understanding the nature of the four noble truths, what need is there to realise emptiness?"

40. "We're freed," you say, "through seeing the [four] truths—
What use is it to us, this view of emptiness?"
But as the scriptures have themselves proclaimed,
Without it there is no enlightenment.

Shantideva responds by arguing that in the scriptures, **the Buddha himself has stated that without the path of emptiness, there is no possibility of even attaining freedom from cyclic existence.** The scriptures he is referring to here are the Mahayana **perfection of wisdom (prajnaparamita) sutras.**

In the perfection of wisdom sutras, the Buddha states that it is not possible to gain freedom while we are grasping onto phenomena as truly existent. He states that even to attain nirvana, or cessation of suffering, realization of emptiness is essential. This argument, however, is based on the assumption that the Mahayana scriptures are authentic teachings of the Buddha.

Other Buddhist traditions, such as the Hinayana, dispute the authenticity of Mahayana scriptures as being Buddha's words. Shantideva therefore places great emphasis on demonstrating that Mahayana scriptures are authentic teachings of the Buddha. So, in the next verse, Shantideva has his opponent question the very authenticity of the Mahayana scriptures.

41. You say the Mahayana has no certainty.
But how do you substantiate your own tradition?
"Because it is accepted by both parties," you will say.
But at the outset, you yourselves lacked proof.

Shantideva responds by asking the question, "But how do you substantiate your own tradition?" The Madhyamikas are raising the point here that even the scriptures that the Hinayana consider to be valid cannot be authenticated right from the start. The opponents respond to this by pointing out that in the case of the Hinayana scriptures, both parties accept their validity, whereas in the case of the Mahayana scriptures, the Hinayanist disputes its validity. The Madhyamikas respond by stating that this shows that the authenticity of Hinayana scriptures is not self-evident, because they have not been authenticated from the outset either. That is to say, surely the Hinayana must have some grounds upon which they have accepted their scripture's validity.

Likewise, Shantideva continues in the next verse, if you consider the reasons why I trust the Mahayana scriptures as valid, then you too will be compelled to accept their validity.

42. The reasons why you trust in your tradition
May likewise be applied to Mahayana.
Moreover, if accord between two parties shows the truth,
The Vedas and rest are also true.

If you still persist with your argument that because both parties (Hinayana and Mahayana) are in accord in accepting the validity of the Hinayana scriptures, and therefore they can be considered valid and au-

thentic, then in line with this reasoning, you would also have to accept the truth of, say, the Vedic teachings, because there will always be two parties who uphold their authenticity.

Shantideva continues in the next verse that if, just because there are people who contest the validity and authenticity of the Mahayana scriptures, this implies sufficient reason to question their validity, then we will have to question the validity of the Hinayana scriptures also.

43. “Mahayana is at fault,” you say, “because it is contested.”
 But by non-Buddhists are your scriptures also questioned,
 While other Buddhist schools impugn and spurn them.
 Therefore, your tradition you must now abandon.

Surely there will always be people, both Buddhist and non-Buddhist, who will dispute the validity of certain Hinayana scriptures. Just because it is disputed by some individuals does not mean that it is untrustworthy. In short, Shantideva argues that whatever grounds the Hinayanist employs to prove the authenticity of the Hinayana scriptures can equally be applied to the Mahayana teachings. Through these arguments, Shantideva attempts to prove the authenticity of the Mahayana scriptures.

Other arguments can also be made to demonstrate the validity of the Mahayana scriptures. For instance, Nagarjuna states that if the Mahayana teachings (a system that explains various levels, grounds, and spiritual paths) did not exist, then we would not be able to attain full enlightenment. Simply engaging in the path of the thirty-seven aspects of the path to enlightenment, as taught in the Hinayana teachings, is not sufficient. This path of the thirty-seven aspects is common to all three levels of objective; the attainments of hearers (*shravaka arhat*) and of solitary realizers (*pratyekabuddha arhat*) and buddhahood. If there exists a major difference at the fruition level, then naturally we would expect a major difference at the causal level as well. Nagarjuna argues it is only by relying on the teachings in the Mahayana scriptures that we can actually establish the validity of the Buddha’s path in general.

Buddhahood and the Three Kayas

According to the Hinayana sutras, Buddha Shakyamuni remained as Prince Siddhartha until the age of twenty-nine. Later, as a result of engaging in six years of meditative practices, based on adopting a monastic way of life, he became fully enlightened around the age of thirty-five. During the next forty-five years, following his full enlightenment, the Buddha worked to fulfil the aspirations of sentient beings. Then at Kushinagara, at the age of eighty, the Buddha entered into *parinirvana*. According to the Hinayana scriptures, the Buddha at that point disappeared into nothingness, and the continuity of his consciousness ceased to exist. If that were the case, we would have to accept that after accumulating merit and wisdom for three innumerable eons, the fulfilment was working for other sentient beings for a mere forty-five years! Rather than being in a totally nonexistent state where the continuum of consciousness has ceased (that is, nirvana) I would personally prefer to have a continuum of consciousness, even if this meant remaining in cyclic existence.

The Mahayana scriptures, by contrast, maintain that Prince Siddhartha, who became fully enlightened, was a *nirmanakaya* (the buddha body of perfect emanation) and was already fully enlightened. Such a being, in its natural embodiment, is *dharmakaya*, the buddha body of reality. From within that sphere, it assumes *sambhogakaya*, the buddha body of perfect resource, from which a buddha assumes various physical embodiments. From one point of view, this conception of buddhahood may seem inconceivable. From another point of view, however, there is a much greater coherence if we correlate the description of buddhahood (its features, qualities, and so on, as described in the Mahayana literature) with the complexity of the causal conditions that give rise to the fully enlightened state. I think this notion of buddhahood has much greater coherence and makes more sense than the state of nonexistence described in the Hinayana scriptures.

The Effects of Wisdom

The Buddha states in the sutras that an effect comes into being in correspondence with its cause. This is the general principle of causality. Ignorance, as a cause, compels the individual to engage in various acts, both negative and positive. These acts again engender multiple effects, such as taking rebirth in the various realms of existence. Even within one single rebirth, there are multiple effects, such as the environment into which a person is born. There is tremendous diversity among sentient beings, and this is due to the diversity of the causes and conditions that create them. All these different forms of existence are replete with suffering. **Ie, if a cause like the ignorant mind can bring such a diversity of effects, it is conceivable that the causes of wisdom will lead to multiple and diverse results also.** However, **if we were to maintain that the only effect of wisdom is the attainment of full enlightenment with no subsequent fulfilment of the welfare of other sentient beings, then it seems to suggest that ignorance is a more powerful cause, because it can give rise to such diverse effects.** This does not make much sense!

Origins of the Mahayana Scriptures

Most importantly, the principle of the four noble truths is accepted by all schools of Buddhism. These teachings on the four noble truths lay down the foundation of the entire Buddhist path. As I mentioned above, **in order to develop a full understanding of the third truth, cessation, we need to rely on the teach-**

ings of the Mahayana scriptures. Without the detailed explanations found in the Mahayana scriptures, full understanding of the truth of cessation cannot arise.

We might feel that many of the Hinayana scriptures, such as those recorded in Pali, are universally accepted as authentic expressions of the Buddha, whereas the Mahayana scriptures are not universally accepted. They are not among the teachings canonised at the three councils that took place after the Buddha's death. One could become suspicious. To this concern, Bhavaviveka responds in his *Blaze of Reasoning (Tarkajvala)* that the Mahayana scriptures were collected and compiled by bodhisattvas such as Vajrapani.

Many of the Hinayana scriptures derive from public discourses, whereas Mahayana scriptures were not taught openly in public. I personally feel, therefore, that these scriptures cannot be judged purely in terms of conventional, historical criteria. Their evolution may need to be understood more in terms of what could be called a mystical perspective. For example, many scriptures belonging to the Vajrayana tradition were taught by the Buddha while assuming the form and identity of the meditational deities. Similarly, many scriptures attributed to the Buddha need not necessarily have been taught by the Buddha in his lifetime as a human on this earth.

Individual practitioners, due to the power of the karmic maturation, could have visionary experience of mandala deities and so on, even after the Buddha's death. Based on such mystical encounters, scriptures could come into being. To this day, there are great revealers of "treasure texts" (*terma*). These masters, with the right qualifications, can reveal texts that have been hidden in the past. Of course, we must consistently watch out for charlatans! But what this possibility reflects is that we do not necessarily need to trace the origin of a Buddhist practice directly to the historical Buddha.

However, there is the problem argued by contemporary scholars that the styles of the composition of many Mahayana scriptures, such as the perfection of wisdom sutras, are relatively recent; that is, those styles were not in vogue at the time of the Buddha. Therefore, they argue that these scriptures cannot be accepted as authentic. An example of this would be the *Kalachakra Tantra*. I concede that the language and the style of composition may not reflect the originality of the Buddha's words, but it is conceivable that the differences in the style of composition result from the differences of the compilers. For example, in Tibetan Buddhism there are many revealed texts attributed to Padmasambhava. Given the different scholastic backgrounds and temperaments of the revealers of these texts, we find diversity in the compositional style even of those texts attributed to Padmasambhava. As this is the case, then the Mahayana scriptures, which are attributed to the Buddha, could easily display a diversity in the style of composition and language due to the different individuals whose visionary, mystical experiences are the basis upon which these scriptural texts were compiled.

Personal Investigation

My defences of the validity of the Mahayana scriptures may sound a bit haphazard to you. The most convincing method of investigation to determine validity may be to use the scientific method; you should undertake your own investigation. Regardless of whether these scriptures can be proven to be the Buddha's original words, what is important is to determine whether or not they are beneficial. Even if something is the original word of the Buddha, if it is not beneficial (ie, if it does not have any positive effect on you) then there is no value in it. On the other hand, even if it cannot be proven that something is the original word of the Buddha, but it is nevertheless beneficial and effective, then of course it still has great value.

Putting aside Indian history and looking only at the lives of past Tibetan masters, while we have to admit that there may be some exaggerations in the biographies of these lamas, we cannot totally dismiss all of these works as pure fantasy. What seems true is that many great masters attained high realisations. So it is important that we do not entirely get lost in these speculations but rather concentrate more on our own personal spiritual practice. With this kind of approach, we can certainly deepen our conviction in the validity of the Buddha's teachings. I think this is more important than delving into speculative questions as to whether these teachings were historically taught by the Buddha. Having said this, these "proofs" of Mahayana scriptures as being authentic are important. For once suspicions of their validity have been raised, it is normal that we would want some answers that would give us confidence. In this sense, the arguments in these verses are quite valuable.

Meditation

Let us now meditate on the theme of the mind. Since all of samsara and nirvana come about from a state of mind (an undisciplined state in the first case and a disciplined state of mind in the second case) the mind is like a creator. Mind is therefore of primary importance. In this meditation session we will examine exactly what this mind is. We will try to identify it.

Generally, when we perceive external objects, because of our habitual attraction to them, they feel familiar. Because of this familiarity, the mind takes on the aspect of that object. For example, when we perceive a vase, sense data similar to the vase arises in our eye sense faculty; the perception arises as if taking on the aspect of that vase. We feel like these perceptions have a kind of tangibility. Since our mind feels somehow fused with that object, the nature of the mind itself remains obscured. This is partly due to our overemphasis on the external world (our objectification of it) and partly because our thoughts are

constantly preoccupied with fears and hopes about the future and recollection of the past. We are often caught up in thoughts of regret and desire. All of these factors mean that our present awareness is typically obscured.

What you should do, then, is consciously restrain your mind from recollecting the past or anticipating, fearing, or hoping about the future. Simply focus on the present moment and do not allow your mind to chase after external objects or events. Do not objectify things, but rather remain in the natural state of mind, simply resting in the present moment. In that way, you will be able to experience a certain mental clarity.

This is a bit like water; when there is turbulence, such as waves or bubbles, we cannot see the clarity of the water itself. Once the water stills, we can perceive it clearly, seeing what is in it. Similarly, we should allow our mind to rest and try to free it of turbulent thought bubbles and waves, try to remain in that non-conceptual state.

This, I should mention, is not an especially profound meditative technique. It is found also in non-Buddhist meditative traditions.

So, in this session, try to meditate on this openness or clarity. Stay in this present, empty state of mind, simply being aware of the mind's present moment. Just remain in this non-conceptual state.