

Chapter 8 The Nature and Existence of Self (Verses 60 - 77)

Practicing Wisdom

Compassion Is Built on Realising Emptiness

Nagarjuna states that **bodhichitta, the altruistic mind of awakening, is the root of enlightenment and that it should be complemented by the wisdom that realises emptiness.** So, if we aspire to attain full enlightenment, we must actualise within ourselves this root, the basis of that attainment. And **the root of this altruistic mind of awakening is great compassion, whose complementary and enhancing factor is the wisdom realising emptiness. These three factors (bodhichitta, great compassion, and the wisdom of emptiness) constitute the essence of the path to full enlightenment. With the practice of these three elements of the path, we can attain the fully omniscient state; when they are absent, buddhahood is impossible.** We could say that **these three aspects of the path are the necessary and sufficient conditions for attaining buddhahood.**

We have been **discussing the view of emptiness and how the wisdom that realises emptiness has the capacity to eradicate our fundamental ignorance and thereby lead us to freedom from suffering. It is through the realization of emptiness that we are able to recognise that the ignorant mind that grasps at the intrinsic existence of phenomena is distorted.** Because it is a state of mind, it can be removed. So, the potential for liberation exists naturally within all beings. **Once we have realised the emptiness of intrinsic existence, it is also possible to develop a genuine sense of powerful compassion toward all sentient beings, who are caught in cyclic existence due to their fundamental ignorance of the nature of reality.**

The Power of Compassion

Of course, **for practicing Buddhists, compassion is crucial to their spiritual path.** Generally, too, we can say that the more altruistic and compassionate a person is, the more the person will be committed to the well-being of other sentient beings. **Even from the point of view of personal self-interest, the stronger the force of someone's compassion, the more courageous and determined that person will be.** All major world religions agree on the importance of compassion. It is not just highly praised: great attention is given to the promotion of compassion as well. There exists in the teachings of these great religions various practical methods for developing compassion. Of course there are differences in philosophy and metaphysics, and, given this diversity, there are also slight differences in how compassion is defined; the understanding of its scope and so on. All the great traditions converge, however, on stressing that **compassion is critically important and that its practice has to do with developing our natural capacity for empathy, sharing in the suffering of others.**

It seems that when we have a compassionate heart, we also have greater courage and determination. Why is this so? I think it is because when we have compassion in our heart, we are not absorbed in our own stresses and conflicts. Rather, we tend to pay greater attention to the suffering and well-being of other beings, and we are better able to relate to others' suffering based on our own experience. As a result, our perspective, and in some cases even the actual experience of our own suffering, pain, and problems, change. What may seem unbearable can appear less significant; even minor. So to someone who is altruistic and compassionate, there will be a sense that his or her own problems and conflicts become quite tolerable. These adversities then have less potential to disturb our peace of mind.

The compassionate state of mind that is infused with a sense of deep concern for the well-being of other sentient beings is arrived at through reasoned consideration, through systematically cultivated thought processes. This powerful sentiment may be accompanied by other forceful emotions, yet when such emotions arise, there will hardly be any room for these to disturb our mind. This is because these emotions are grounded in reasoned considerations; that is, the faculty of human intelligence plays a great role in their development. In contrast, **in our day-to-day life, we often encounter situations and experiences that provoke us into emotional explosions. I consider these types of responses to trivial incidents as afflictive, because they only cause disturbance and throw our mind off balance.** If our mindstream is infused with compassionate thoughts and a good heart, adversities that would normally give rise to a strong emotional reaction do not provoke us. There is an underlying stability and rootedness.

Sharing in the Pain of Others

Often people think of compassion as a feeling of pity, and regard the person who is the object of compassion as somewhat inferior. I do not think this is correct. **Genuine compassion must arise from recognising that other beings (just like ourselves) desire happiness and wish to overcome suffering.** Based on this, a genuine empathy or connectedness arises when we encounter others' suffering. This is genuine compassion. We feel responsible toward the other and a deep concern for the other's welfare. There is therefore an underlying recognition of utter equality between ourselves and others. There is a genuine respect for others' natural aspiration to attain happiness and to overcome suffering, and a recognition of their right to fulfil that aspiration.

When compassion is generated, because of our deep contemplation of others' suffering and sharing in it, it is possible that this could disturb our mental calm to some extent. Therefore, we may want to ask, "When cultivating compassion, are we not taking upon ourselves additional suffering?" I think this is a critical question and requires serious thought.

To begin with, I feel there is a big difference between the pain and suffering that we undergo naturally as part of our own cycle of life and what we experience as a result of voluntarily sharing in others' suffering. In our own case, we undergo pain and suffering with no real say in the matter. We have no control over what we experience. In the case of others, the equilibrium in our mind may be slightly disturbed, but because we have taken it upon ourselves voluntarily for a specific purpose, the effect on our mind is totally different. I don't think we get totally overwhelmed by the suffering and pain. Instead of an agonising burden, I think that deep down there is a sense of joy, of confidence borne of strength.

To develop such a powerful state of mind as compassion, which has great spiritual value and benefits, it is not adequate merely to contemplate the suffering of others. It is important to first reflect upon your own suffering and develop a deep sense of its unbearableness. As this feeling deepens and becomes stronger, you will be better able to empathise with others' suffering. Generally, when we see beings who are in acute pain, we naturally feel compassionate. However, **if we see someone who is, in our eyes, successful in worldly terms (wealthy, powerful, and with lots of friends) instead of feeling compassion toward such a person, we may feel envy. This shows that our realization of the suffering nature of human existence is not profound. It is crucial to first generate a deep insight into the suffering nature of our own existence.**

A Step-by-Step Approach

We should not only recognise evident sufferings as painful and undesirable, we must also recognise as undesirable the suffering of change and, most importantly, the pervasive suffering of conditioning. The point here is that we need to engage in a path with a **step-by-step approach**. Therefore, **we need a combined approach of analytic meditation on the one hand and absorptive meditation on the other.** Since compassion is a quality of the mind, and since the mind has a never-ending continuum, **if you pursue this path of combining meditation of analysis and absorption for a long time, your spiritual practice will acquire a stable basis.**

This stable basis becomes part of the mind through the force of habit. Those who believe in rebirth will look at two children of the same family and speak of their having different predispositions carried over from the past. We say that this child has one kind of predisposition, while the other is inclined differently. **Although the body is new to this lifetime, the consciousness continues from the previous life. It is in this sense that the qualities in the mindstream are believed to be stable and enduring.**

In contrast, people have other qualities, such as athletic prowess, that are entirely contingent upon the body. There is a limit to how much we can enhance this capacity; it is not limitless. For example, regardless of how talented an athlete may be, he or she can only jump so much. Furthermore, these qualities endure only as long as the physical conditions remain intact. **They cannot be carried over into the next life. However, the continuum of the mind does carry on. Therefore, a quality based on the mind is more enduring.**

So, through training the mind, qualities such as compassion, love, and the wisdom realising emptiness can be developed. Through familiarisation these qualities can be developed to their highest potentials. Although initially it may require a good deal of effort, once you get beyond a certain point, the development becomes spontaneous, natural, and self-sustaining. There is no need for further effort. This is why we can say that these qualities can be developed infinitely.

If we interrupt our athletic training, we will have to go through the whole training procedure again to bring our skill back to its previous level. However, **once we have developed a quality of the mind to a level of spontaneity, although we may leave it aside for a long time, a slight application will bring it back to the prior level.** The difference between the two qualities is due to the difference of their bases, mental and physical.

In this way, the development of the mind through successive lifetimes is understood. Even if you do not make much headway in this lifetime, because the qualities acquired in the mind will be retained, these predispositions can be activated in the future.

In order to enhance our potential for compassion to its infinite level, the realization of emptiness is indispensable. From our personal experience we can see that when our mind remains in a state of confusion, uncertainty, and ignorance, then even short moments of time can be painful and agonising. On the other hand, if our mind is filled with wisdom and insight, although a task may involve great emotional hardship, we do not feel that this is an ordeal. Therefore, **it is important to enhance our wisdom by cultivating an understanding of emptiness.** For that, it is necessary to study texts outlining the doctrine of emptiness, such as Shantideva's *The Way of the Bodhisattva*.

Commentary

Refuting Non-Buddhist Views of Self

We continue the discussion of the emptiness, or identitylessness, of persons now with Shantideva's refutation of the self posited by various philosophical schools, particularly the Samkhya school, which identifies the self as an independent, autonomous consciousness. The other school whose views are negated here is the Vaisheshika, which accepts a notion of self as a material, autonomous, and independent reality. These two views of self are negated in verses 60-69.

I will not go into great detail about the refutation of self as posited by these non-Buddhist schools, but some context is necessary. The essence of the Samkhya's theory of self is a classification of reality into twenty-five categories, twenty-three of which are manifestations of one called the primal substance. The remaining category is the self, which is conceived as a cognitive awareness that is an autonomous reality. The twenty-three categories are thought of as "enjoyments" of the self. The Samkhyas maintain that as long as we remain unenlightened, we are ignorant of the fact that all these categories are created by the primal substance, and we therefore remain in a world of multiplicity and duality. However, they say, when we realise that these categories are actually manifestations of the primal substance, then the self becomes liberated and the world of duality and appearances dissolves. The specific refutation of the Samkhyas' concept of primal substance, which they define as the state of equilibrium of three forces (the neutral, positive, and negative forces) comes later in the text. At this point, only their conception of self is being refuted by Shantideva.

According to Samkhya, the self "enjoys" because it is the subject that experiences pain and pleasure, and so on. It is permanent because it is not born and does not die. It is devoid of any functions, for it is not the creator of all the manifestations at the level of multiplicity. Because the self does not possess the qualities of the three fundamental aspects (neutral, positive, and negative) it is free of these characteristics. These characteristics of the self are in contrast with the primal substance. Since the self is all-pervasive, it has no specific functions as such. In its nature, the self is consciousness. Because it is indivisible, it is a unitary reality (infinite, limitless, and all-pervasive). These are the characteristics of self as conceived by the Samkhya. In the following verses, Shantideva draws our attention to the contradictions involved in this conception of the self. Of course, if you actually come across a learned, non-Buddhist Indian scholar, he may well have many arguments in defence of this view!

The verses begin by supposing that, if the consciousness of sound is the permanent self, then how can the Samkhya state that it has a function of cognition?

60. If the hearing consciousness is permanent,
It follows that it's hearing all the time.
If there is no object, what is knowing what?
Why do you now say that there is consciousness?

61. If consciousness is that which does not know,
It follows that a stick is also conscious.
Therefore, in the absence of a thing to know,
It is clear that consciousness will not arise.

How can you attribute to the self the quality of knowing? You would be implying that if the self is the consciousness of sound, then sound will be perceived at all times. On the other hand, if you assert that cognitions exist even in the absence of their objects (such as sound) then it follows that a piece of wood could be conscious, since cognitions do not require objects. You have to agree then, that without objects of cognition, there can be no cognitions. Shantideva continues:

62. "But consciousness may turn to apprehend a form," you say.
But why, then, does it cease to hear?
Perhaps you say the sound's no longer there.
If so, the hearing consciousness is likewise absent.

63. How could that which has the nature of perceiving sound
Be changed into a form-perceiver?
"A single man," you say, "can be both son and father."
But these are merely names; his nature is not so.

64. Thus "pleasure," "pain," "neutrality"
Do not partake of fatherhood or sonship,
And we indeed have never yet observed
A consciousness of form perceiving sound.

65. "But like an actor," you will say, "it takes on different roles."
If so, this consciousness is not a changeless thing.
"It's one thing," you will say, "with different modes."
That's unity indeed, and never seen before!

66. "But different modes," you claim, "without reality."
And so its essence you must now describe.

You say that this is simply knowing—
All beings therefore are a single thing.

67. What has mind and what does not have mind
Are likewise one, for both are equal in existing.
If the different features are deceptive,
What is the support that underlies them?

Next follows the refutation of the Vaisheshika theory of self. In this view, self is posited as being an inanimate, material substance.

68. Something destitute of mind, we hold, cannot be self,
For mindlessness means matter, like a vase.
“But,” you say, “the self has consciousness, when joined to mind.”
But this refutes its nature of unconsciousness.

69. If the self, moreover, is immutable,
What change in it could mingling with the mind produce?
And selfhood we might equally affirm
Of empty space, inert and destitute of mind.

The Continuity of the Conventional Self

The following short section, verses 70-77, are Shantideva's answers to the objections against the emptiness of self. One objection is that if the self does not exist, then the law of karma will become inoperable. This is a criticism of the Madhyamaka rejection of the self as conceived by other schools.

70. “If,” you ask, “the self does not exist,
How can acts be linked with their results?
If when the deed is done, the doer is no more,
Who is there to reap the karmic fruit?”

The key point being raised is that if we do not accept an enduring, permanent self that comes from the previous life to this life and carries on its continuum in the future, then (even within one single lifetime) we have no connection between the person who accumulates the karma and the one who experiences its effect. Without a self, they object, how can we maintain these two people as the same person? If they are not identical, this contradicts fundamental principles of the karmic law.

According to the principles of karma, no one can experience consequences of karmic acts they did not commit. Conversely, individuals must inevitably face the karmic consequences of their actions unless the potencies of the karmic deeds are somehow neutralised. Therefore, if the person who accumulates karma and the person who experiences the fruition are two separate people, the law of karma is violated.

Shantideva's response to this objection is found in the next verse.

71. The basis of the act and fruit are not the same,
And thus a self lacks scope for its activity.
On this, both you and we are in accord—
What point is there in our debating?
72. A cause coterminous with its result
Is something quite impossible to see.
And only in the context of a single mental stream
Can it be said that one who acts will later reap the fruit.

In other words, **the karmic action is the cause, and the fruition of this is its consequence. However, from the point of view of time, the identity of the person who was responsible for the karmic act in the past and that of the person who undergoes the consequences are not one and the same. One exists at a particular time, while the other exists at another time.**

To maintain their identity as one and the same in time would contradict even our ordinary conventions and experience. Their relationship as the same person is maintained because they share a single continuum of existence. Although the person undergoes moment-by-moment change, the basic continuum remains.

We can take the example of the continuum of our own body. From a physiological perspective, all our cells are completely different now than when we were younger. At the cellular level, there has been a total change. In fact, this change allows us to speak about a process of aging. What is so beautiful and attractive at a young age later becomes wrinkled and unattractive. However, in terms of the continuum, it is the same body. Because of this, we can make such statements as, “I read such-and-such a book when I was young.”

If we assume an identity of the same individual through time, on the basis of the mental continuum, then we can trace the continuity even further. For example, if as a result of heightened awareness, we are able to recall past lives, then we can say that when I was such-and-such, I was born here, and we can speak about a continuum of a single person through a much longer time frame. It

is on the basis of this continuum of the consciousness that we can speak of the relationship between karma and its fruition.

For the Madhyamika, such as Shantideva, **there is no intrinsically existing self; the self is thought of as a nominal convention.** From this point of view we can speak of **different aspects of the self.** For example, **we can speak of the self that came from a previous life that is the same as the self in this particular life.** We can speak of a particular person as, say, a Tibetan self, qualified by an ethnic identity, or we can speak of the self of a fully ordained monk, and so on. Thus, even on the basis of one individual, we can speak of different aspects of the self. In the case of a particular individual, we can say that he is a man, a Tibetan person, a Buddhist, a monk, or a fully ordained monk, and so forth. Although all of these different aspects of the self belong to one and the same individual, they did not all come into being simultaneously. The identity of these evolved in different contexts and circumstances.

So, from the point of view of the continuum, we can maintain that the self is, in some sense, permanent or eternal without contradicting that the self is momentarily changing. **From the point of view of its moment-by-moment change, the self is transient and impermanent.** Thus, **there is no contradiction in maintaining that in terms of its continuum, it is eternal, yet in terms of its momentary existence, it is impermanent.** Of course, I am not suggesting that the self is permanent in the sense of unchanging!

Is the Mind the Self?

Since Madhyamikas accept a self nominally designated on the basis of body and mind, can the self can be identified with the mind? Among the various Buddhist philosophical schools, a few do maintain, in the final analysis, that the consciousness is the self. For example, the Indian master Bhavaviveka states in his *Blaze of Reasoning* that, effectively, the continuum of the mental consciousness (the sixth consciousness) is the self. Prasāngika-Madhyamikas do not accept this view. **From their point of view, nothing whatsoever among the bases of designation (neither the bodily continuum nor the consciousness) can be regarded as the self, or the person.**

Shantideva, for instance, asks that if we are to posit consciousness as the self, then which one do we choose?

**73. The thoughts now passed, and those to come, are not the self;
They are no more, or are not yet.
Is then the self the thought which now is born?
If so, it sinks to nothing when the latter fades.**

Is it the past consciousness, or that which will come in the future, or is it the present? The past consciousness has already ceased, and the future is yet to come. If the present moment of consciousness is the self, then, since it is momentary, once it ceases to exist, the self or person would also cease to exist. Also, if consciousness is the self, then the concept of subject and object becomes untenable. Also, the self and its consciousness cannot be said to have any relationship since, in the final analysis, consciousness is the person.

Preserving the Relative World

Shantideva next states, briefly, that as in the case of a banana tree, no matter how much peeling we do, we cannot find any core.

**74. For instance, we may take banana trees—
Cutting through the fibres, finding nothing.
Likewise, analytical investigation
Will find no “I,” no underlying self.**

When we search for the self among the aggregates (body, feeling, perceptions, consciousness) we only find the unfindability of the self. No real core to our being can be identified as the real self.

The next objection raised against the Madhyamika's rejection of self asks: **if self does not exist, then there are no sentient beings; if there are no sentient beings, then toward whom do we generate compassion?**

**75. “If beings,” you will say, “have no existence,
Who will be the object of compassion?”
Those whom ignorance imputes and vows to save,
Intending thus to gain the lofty goal.**

Shantideva responds to this by saying that although there is no independently existing self and therefore no independently existing sentient beings, within the framework of the relative truth, there are sentient beings. **By “ignorance” here, Shantideva is not referring to the grasping at intrinsic existence, the fundamental ignorance that is at the root of our unenlightened existence.** What he is saying is similar to the statement found in Chandrakīrti's *Supplement to the Middle Way*, where the universe is said to be the product of the ignorant mind. Shantideva says that within the framework of relative truth (that is, within the validity of the conventional world of everyday experience) self does exist. Therefore, sentient beings exist for whom we can generate compassion, and these sentient beings have real suffering.

Shantideva next considers a follow-up objection, asking, if there are no sentient beings, then are there are no practitioners of the path who attain the goal?

76. “Since beings are no more,” you ask, “who gains the fruit?”
It’s true! The aspiration’s made in ignorance.
But for the total vanquishing of sorrow,
The goal, which ignorance conceives, should not be spurned.

Shantideva acknowledges that this is very true, but states that if we are not content with the validity of the conventional world and seek what is beyond it, we will not find any sentient beings. Within the framework of the relative world, however, there are sentient beings who suffer. So, to gain freedom from suffering, we can engage in a path that will lead to the elimination of the cause; ignorance. **This is the ignorant mind grasping at the intrinsic existence of things and events. In essence, what is being stated here is that it is the causal ignorance (which gives rise to suffering, confusion, and so on) that must be rooted out, and not the reality of the conventional world. The world of relativity, the world of cause and effect, is not to be negated.**

The question could now be raised: if the reality of the conventional world is not to be negated, then don’t we conventionally accept that things and events possess some form of objective, independent status; that something can be pointed out as the true referent of our terms and concepts? Do you also mean that that cannot be destroyed?

77. ‘The source of sorrow is the pride of saying “I,”
Fostered and increased by false belief in self.
To this you may say that there’s no redress,
But meditation on no-self will be the supreme way.

Shantideva responds by saying that **grasping onto that form of existence is indeed the source of suffering, and gives rise to anger, desire, and delusions. These in turn cause the grasping onto self to increase further, so this ignorant grasping mind needs to be eliminated.**

Although we might agree on the need to eliminate this grasping, one could ask whether that is actually possible, and if so, how? Shantideva’s response is that we can eliminate this ignorance because we can develop its opposing state of mind, the insight into emptiness. This insight directly opposes the way our mind grasps onto a nonexistent self. Since, in reality, there is no such self, the insight that penetrates into the nature of reality perceives its absence. Thus, meditation on emptiness is firmly based on reason and can therefore eliminate the ignorant mind that grasps onto the intrinsic existence of the self.

Meditation

*Now meditate on compassion. For this, first visualise a sentient being who is going through acute pain or suffering. Focus on that being and develop the thought that just like me, that sentient being possesses the natural aspiration to be happy and overcome suffering. And have they both wish to overcome suffering, and the capacity to do so. Then remind yourself that **the root cause of suffering is the misperceiving mind grasping at intrinsic existence, a distorted mind that has the potential to be eliminated. This can be achieved by generating a deep insight into the nature of emptiness.** Reflect upon these potentials. We should then develop a deep compassion for all beings and try to enhance that capacity within.*

With these thoughts as a background, focus on one sentient being and then gradually extend your contemplation to other sentient beings, such as your neighbours. Then expand it further, seeing if you can also include people you do not like, such as those who have harmed you. Reflect upon their feelings. Regardless of how they behave toward you, reflect that, like you, they too have the natural desire to be happy and to overcome suffering.

Because of the fundamental equality of all beings in having this natural aspiration to be happy and to overcome suffering, we can develop empathy and strong compassion toward each and every being. By training our mind by focusing on specific beings (friends, enemies, and neutral people) we will be able to extend compassion toward everyone. This point is crucial. Otherwise, we risk having the idea that there are faceless sentient beings out there toward whom we can develop compassion, but then fail to generate any compassion toward the people with whom we have direct contact, especially our neighbours. This type of discriminatory attitude might arise in us. Try to be aware of this concern while meditating on compassion.