

## Chapter 9 The Nature of Phenomena (Verses 78 - 105)

### Commentary

#### *The Whole and Its Parts*

Next follows Shantideva's presentation of the identitylessness (or selflessness) of phenomena, which is explained first by means of the *four mindfulnesses* (mindfulness of the body, of feelings, of mind, and of phenomena). So, according to Shantideva's text, first we reflect upon the nature of our own body. This is done by contemplating the body's general and specific characteristics. These include, for example, the aging process and the impure substances that constitute bodily existence. I won't go into the details of this contemplation here.

Generally speaking, **meditating on the mindfulness of body, reflecting upon the nature of our own body, is the approach explained in the Hinayana scriptures.** However, **we can extend this contemplation to the nature of the body, feelings, mind, and phenomena of all beings,** who are limitless like space. It then becomes a training of the mind according to the Mahayana path. **When we contemplate the emptiness of these four factors (body, feelings, mind, and phenomena) we are practicing a mindfulness meditation focused on the ultimate truth.**

*The Way of the Bodhisattva* gives us a systematic practice for these four mindfulness meditations on emptiness. Let us take as our example the human body. It is composed of many different parts: head, arms, legs, and so on. There is also the whole; the body as a complete unit. Generally when we think of *body*, it appears to our mind, at least on the surface, as if there is a single entity that we can point to as a tangible, unitary reality. **Based on this commonsense view, we can speak of various characteristics and parts of the body.** In other words, **we feel as if there is fundamentally a thing called *body*, and we can speak about its parts.** Yet if we search for this "body" apart from its various parts, we come to realise that it is actually not to be found.

This is what Shantideva means in the following verses.

78. What we call the body is not feet or shins,  
The body, likewise, is not thighs or loins.  
It's not the belly nor indeed the back,  
And from the chest and arms the body is not formed.

79. The body is not ribs or hands,  
Armpits, shoulders, bowels, or entrails;  
It is not the head or throat:  
From none of these is "body" constituted.

We have a concept of our body as a unitary entity, which we hold to be precious and dear. Yet if we look more carefully, we find that the body is not the feet, nor the calves, the thighs, the hips, the abdomen, the back, the chest, the arms, the hands, the side of the torso, the armpits, the shoulders, the neck, nor the head or any other parts. So where is "body" to be found? If, on the other hand, the body were identical to the individual parts of the body, then the very idea of the body as a unitary entity would be untenable.

80. If "body," step by step,  
Pervades and spreads itself throughout its members,  
Its parts indeed are present in the parts,  
But where does "body," in itself, abide?

81. If "body," single and entire,  
Is present in the hand and other members,  
However many parts there are, the hand and all the rest,  
You'll find an equal quantity of "bodies."

**If this unitary, single entity called body is identical to, or exists separately in, each individual part, then just as there are various parts of the body, the body too will become multiple.**

Therefore, continues Shantideva, **the body does not exist as identical to the individual parts of the body, nor can it exist separately and independently of these parts.**

82. If "body" is not outside or within its parts,  
How is it, then, residing in its members?  
And since it has no basis other than its parts,  
How can it be said to be at all?

83. Thus there is no "body" in the limbs,  
But from illusion does the idea spring  
And is affixed to a specific shape,  
Just as when a scarecrow is mistaken for a man.

**So how can this body be autonomous, independent, and self-existent? If we carefully examine the nature of the body, we find that the body is nothing more than a designation that we assign on**

**the basis of the aggregation of various parts. We might ask, “What then is the body?”** Due to circumstantial conditions such as the lighting, appearance of the object, and so on, we can sometimes mistake a certain shape as a human being.

Similarly, says Shantideva, as long as the appropriate conditions and factors are assembled that give rise to the sense of there being a person, then we can conventionally posit the concept of body on that basis.

84. As long as the conditions are assembled,  
A body will appear and seem to be a man.  
As long as all the parts are likewise present,  
It's there that we will see a body.

However, **if we search for the true referent behind the term body, then we will find nothing.** The upshot is **we arrive at the conclusion that “body” is, in the final analysis, a conventional construction (a relative truth) that comes into being only by depending on various causes and conditions.**

This above analysis can also be extended to the individual parts of the body, as Shantideva does in the next verses.

85 Likewise, since it is a group of fingers,  
The hand itself is not a single entity.  
And so it is with fingers, made of joints;  
And joints themselves consist of many parts.

86. These parts themselves will break down into atoms,  
And atoms will divide according to direction.  
These fragments, too, will also fall to “nothing.

**Thus atoms are like empty space—they have no real existence.**

When we speak of a hand, we find that it also is a composite of various parts. If a hand existed intrinsically and independently, this would contradict its having the nature of being dependent on other factors. If we search for a hand itself, we do not find a hand separate from the various parts that form it. Just as with a hand, a finger too is a composite that when dissected loses its existence. With any part of the body, if we search for the true referent behind its name, nothing is to be found.

When we dissect the parts even into their elemental constituents (molecules, atoms, and so on) these too become unfindable. We can carry on dividing even the atoms themselves in terms of their directional surfaces and find, again, that the very idea of atom is a mental construct. If we carry on still further, we find that the very idea of matter, or atoms, becomes untenable. In order for anything to be characterised as material, it must have parts. Once we go beyond that and dissect further, what remains is nothing “but emptiness.

**To our commonsense view, things and events appear as if they have some form of independent and objective status.** However, as Shantideva points out in the next verse, **if we search for the true nature of such phenomena, we eventually arrive at their unfindability.**

87. All form, therefore, is like a dream,  
And who will be attached to it, who thus investigates?  
The body, in this way, has no existence;  
What is male, therefore, and what is female?

So, **we can see that there is nothing absolute about the objects of our anger and attachment.** Nothing is desirable or perfect in the absolute sense, neither is anything undesirable and repulsive in the absolute sense. Therefore, in reality, there is no ground for extreme emotional reactions to things and events. Since the body cannot be found when sought through critical analysis, so the designations we make on the basis of the existence of the body (such as differences of gender and race) are also ultimately devoid of essence. **So now, what grounds do we have to generate extreme and volatile emotional responses to people of different gender or race?**

### **How Do Things Exist?**

When we examine the phenomenological experience of emotions coming and going within us, there is, generally speaking, the appearance that all the things and events each have an independent and objective reality. This is especially so with a strong negative emotion like hatred. **We impose a kind of concreteness upon the object such that the object appears to us in sharper contrast, with a very solid reality of its own. In reality, there are no such tangible, concrete objects.** However, we have to ask, if these objects are unfindable, does this mean they do not exist at all? This is not the case. **Of course they do exist. The question is not whether they exist but how they exist. They exist, but not in the manner in which we perceive them. They lack any discrete, intrinsic reality. This absence, or emptiness, of inherent existence is their ultimate nature.**

The analytic process that seeks the true referents of our terms and concepts is not so complex, and **it's not that difficult to arrive at the conclusion that things and events are unfindable when sought through such a process.** However, this absence we arrive at after discerning the unfindability of phenomena through such analysis is not the final emptiness. **Once we have arrived at this unfindability of things and events, then we can ask in what manner they actually do exist.** We would then realise that the existence of things and events must be understood in terms of their relativity. And **when we understand things and events as dependent for their existence on causes and conditions (and also as mere designations) we come to realise that things and events lack independence or self-determining authority. We see their nature clearly as dependent on other factors. And as long as anything exists only in dependence on other factors (governed by other forces) it cannot be said to be independent.** For independence and dependence are mutually exclusive; there is also no third possibility.

It is critical to understand that a Madhyamika does not say that things are absent of inherent existence merely because they cannot be found when sought through critical analysis. This is not the full argument.

**Things and events are said to be absent of inherent or intrinsic existence because they exist only in dependence on other factors.** This is the real premise. This style of reasoning eliminates two extremes; the extreme of nihilism, because one accepts a level of existence in terms of interdependence, and the extreme of absolutism, because one denies the intrinsic existence of phenomena.

The Buddha stated in sutra that anything that comes into being through dependence on conditions has the nature of being unborn. What does *unborn* mean here? Certainly we are not talking about the unborn nature of a nonexistent entity, such as the horn of a rabbit. Likewise, we are not denying the origination of things and events on a conventional level. What we are saying is that all phenomena that depend on conditions have the nature of emptiness. In other words, **anything that depends on other factors is devoid of its own independent nature, and this absence of an independent nature is emptiness.**

In his *Stanzas on the Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, Nagarjuna says that things and events, which are dependently originated, are empty, and thus are also dependently designated. He says dependent origination is the path of the Middle Way, which transcends the extremes of absolutism and nihilism. This statement is followed by another passage, which reads:

**There is no thing  
That is not dependently originated;  
Therefore there is no thing  
That is not empty [of intrinsic existence].**

Nagarjuna concludes **there is nothing that is not empty, for there is nothing that is not dependently originated. Here we see the equation between dependent origination and emptiness.**

When we read the passages in *The Way of the Bodhisattva* dealing with the unfindability of things and events, it is crucial not to let ourselves be drawn into nihilism. **This is the false conclusion that nothing really exists, and therefore, nothing really matters.** This extreme must be avoided.

## Practicing Wisdom

### ***Beyond the Intellectual Understanding***

An intellectual understanding of emptiness is different from a full realization of emptiness, wherein there is no cognition of the dependent origination of things. The Buddha states in a sutra cited in Nagarjuna's *Compendium of Sutras (Sutrasamuchaya)* that if in our meditations on emptiness we have even the slightest affirmative element (for instance, "This is emptiness," or "Things must exist") then we are still caught in the web of grasping. As far as the cognitive content of our meditative experiences of emptiness is concerned, it must be a total absorption within the mere negation, the absence of intrinsic existence. There should be no affirmative elements within that meditative state.

However, **when you have gained a very deep understanding of emptiness, you will get to a point where your very concept of existence and nonexistence changes. At this stage, even with regard to familiar objects, you will see a marked difference in your perception and your attitude toward them. You will recognise their illusion-like nature.** That is, **when the recognition dawns that although things appear to be solid and autonomous they do not exist in that way, this indicates that you are really arriving at an experiential understanding of emptiness. This is known as perceiving things as illusion-like.** In fact, when you have gained a deep realization of emptiness, there is no need to make separate efforts to attain this perspective. **After your own profound realization and experience of the emptiness of phenomena, things will appear spontaneously and naturally in the nature of illusion.**

**As your understanding of emptiness deepens and becomes a full experience of emptiness, you will be able to both confirm the emptiness of phenomena by merely reflecting on dependent origination,<sup>16</sup> and also your ascertainment of emptiness will reinforce your conviction in the validity of**

<sup>16</sup> See *Dependant Arising (Buddhist Glossary Advanced)*

**cause and effect.** In this way, **your understanding of both emptiness and dependent origination will reinforce and complement each other, giving rise to powerful progress in your realization.**

You might think that when your understanding deepens in this way, you have reached such a high level of realization that you are at the threshold of becoming fully enlightened! This is definitely not the case. **At this initial stage, on what is called the *path of accumulation*, your understanding of emptiness is still inferential. In deepening your understanding of emptiness further, it is essential to develop another mental factor; the faculty of *single-pointedness*.** It is possible that we can, by using the analytic approach, arrive at a single-pointedness of the mind, but it is more effective and easier is to first have stability of the mind, and then, using that stability, reflect on the empty nature of phenomena. In any case, **it is essential to attain tranquil abiding (*shamata*).**<sup>17</sup> **Once you have gained tranquil abiding, you then use that stable mind to meditate on emptiness. In this way you arrive at a union of tranquil abiding (*shamata*) and penetrative insight (*vipashyana*).**

**You have now arrived at the *path of preparation*.** From this point onward there will be a gradual reduction in dualistic appearances during meditative equipoise on emptiness. This gradual diminishing of dualistic appearances will culminate in a direct and utterly non-conceptual realization of emptiness. Such a state, free from dualism and grasping at intrinsic existence, is known as the *true path*. **At this point, you have become an *arya*, a “superior being.”**

**The true path results in the attainment of a true cessation; the cessation of certain levels of deluded states and afflictions. This is when we have an unmediated, experiential knowledge of the true Dharma, one of the three objects of refuge. Only at this stage do we really have the first opportunity to say “hello” to the true Dharma jewel. We have yet to tread the subsequent stages of the path in order to attain full enlightenment.** During the first two paths of accumulation and preparation, the first incalculable eon of the accumulation of merit is completed. Through the first seven bodhisattva levels, which begin upon reaching the true path, the accumulation of merit of the second incalculable eon is completed. At the eighth bodhisattva level, we finally overcome all the afflictive emotions and thoughts. We then progress through the *pure grounds* (the eighth, ninth, and tenth bodhisattva levels) which are *pure* in that they are free from the stains of afflictions. It is during these three levels that the accumulation of merit of the third incalculable eon is perfected. So you can see that it takes a long time to attain complete enlightenment!

At the last instance of the tenth bodhisattva level, we generate an extremely powerful wisdom of emptiness that acts as an antidote to remove even the habitual patterns, predispositions, and imprints formed by all our past afflictions and deluded states of mind, and this then culminates in the attainment of full omniscience, or buddhahood.

### **The Crucial Sense of Commitment and Courage**

We can see that there is a systematic “plan” for attaining enlightenment. You don’t have to grope around in the dark without any direction. The layout of the entire path and its correlation to the accumulation of merit over a period of these incalculable eons illustrate a clear direction. Practitioners need to be aware of this fact and on that basis try to develop a deep determination and commitment to their spiritual pursuits. If you then supplement your practice with tantric Vajrayana methods, your approach will definitely be sound and well grounded.

If, on the other hand, when thinking of three incalculable eons, you become totally disheartened and discouraged and then try to seek an easier path for yourself through tantric practice, that’s a totally wrong attitude. Furthermore, this would reflect that your commitment to Dharma practice is not strong. What is crucial is a sense of commitment and courage that is prepared (if necessary) to go through three incalculable eons to perfect the conditions for full enlightenment. If on the basis of such determination and courage you then embark on the Vajrayana path, your approach would be well grounded and powerful. Otherwise, it is like building a large structure without a firm foundation. Without doubt, there is great profundity in the tantric approach. However, whether that can be utilised depends on the capacity of the individual.

Of course, I am speaking here on the basis of my own personal observation. I too used to feel that three incalculable eons was too long. This time frame seemed unimaginable, something that I could not accept, whereas the time frame envisioned for enlightenment in tantra seemed more manageable. Understandably the swiftness of the Vajrayana path held a particular attraction. However, gradually my feelings have changed, especially toward the time frame of three incalculable eons. I have slowly grown to feel attracted toward the sutra approach and have actually begun to see the tremendous beneficial effects it can have in deepening our dedication to spiritual practice.

## **Commentary**

### ***Mindfulness of the Emptiness of Feelings***

Next is the meditation on the mindfulness of feelings, which Shantideva presents by analysing the emptiness of feelings. We read the following:

<sup>17</sup> See Shamata (Buddhist Glossary Advanced)

88. If suffering itself is truly real,  
Then why is joy not altogether quenched thereby?  
If pleasure's real, then why will pleasant tastes  
Not comfort and amuse a man in agony?
89. If the feeling fails to be experienced  
Through being overwhelmed by something stronger,  
How can "feeling" rightly be ascribed  
To that which lacks the character of being felt?
90. Perhaps you say that only subtle pain remains,  
Its grosser form has now been overmastered,  
Or rather it is felt as mere pleasure.  
But what is subtle still remains itself.
91. If, through presence of its opposite,  
Pain and sorrow fail to manifest,  
To claim with such conviction that it's felt  
Is surely nothing more than empty words.

If the sensations of suffering and pain existed independently, they would not depend on other factors, and joyful experiences would be impossible. Similarly, if happiness existed independently, it would preclude grief, pain, and illness. And if the sensations of joy and pleasure existed intrinsically, then even were a person confronting an agonising tragedy or pain, that person would still derive the same pleasure from food and comforts that he or she normally does.

Since feeling is in the nature of sensation, it must exist in relation to circumstances. We also find in our personal experiences that sensations can overwhelm each another. For example, if we are gripped by strong grief, that can permeate our entire experience and prevent us from experiencing any joy. Similarly, if we feel intense joy, that too can permeate our experience such that adverse news and mishaps do not cause us serious concern.

However, if we were to insist that underlying all of this is an independent event called *feeling*, the Madhyamika would respond, "Wouldn't that event depend on other factors, such as its causes and conditions?" So the idea of an independent feeling is only a fiction, a fantasy. There is no independently existing feeling that is not in the nature of pleasure, pain, or neutrality. There cannot be sensation or feeling that is not in the nature of any of these three basic patterns of experience.

Having established the absence of intrinsic existence of phenomena, Shantideva goes on to say that we should use this understanding as an antidote to our grasping at true existence; in this particular case, our grasping at feelings as if they have an independent, concrete reality.

92. Since so it is, the antidote  
Is meditation and analysis.  
Investigation and resultant concentration  
Is indeed the food and sustenance of yogis.

Such single-pointed meditation on the emptiness of feeling is like the fuel for generating penetrative insight into emptiness. At the beginning of this ninth chapter, Shantideva stated that first we must cultivate single-pointedness of mind and attain tranquil abiding, and then generate penetrative insight. Through the combination of tranquil abiding and penetrative insight, the meditator will be able to engage in the profound yoga focused on emptiness. "The food and sustenance of yogis" refers to meditative absorption arrived at through contemplation on the emptiness of feelings.

**Feelings, then, arise due to contact, which is their cause.**

93. If between the sense power and a thing  
There is a space, how will the two terms meet?  
If there is no space, they form a unity,  
And therefore, what is it that meets with what?

However, if sought through critical analysis, the contact that gives rise to feelings does not exist in any absolute sense either. This verse presents an analysis of the nature of contact. **Contact, a mental factor, is defined as the meeting point between a sense faculty and an object. It arises when consciousness, the object, and the sense faculty all come together.** Shantideva asks, "If there is an interval of space between the sense organs and sensory objects, where is the contact?" For example, if two atoms are totally intermingled, then they become identical; we cannot speak of a distinction between the two. So we read in the following verses:

94. Atoms and atoms cannot interpenetrate,  
For they are equal, lacking any volume.  
But if they do not penetrate, they do not mingle;  
And if they do not mingle, there is no encounter.

95. For how could anyone accept  
That what is partless could be said to meet?  
And you must show me, if you ever saw,  
A contact taking place between two partless things.

Not only that, Shantideva continues, but also, since consciousness is immaterial, **how can we define it with the word *contact*, which relates to matter? “What can come into contact with consciousness?”** he asks:

96. The consciousness is immaterial,  
And so one cannot speak of contact with it.  
A combination, too, has no reality,  
And this we have already demonstrated.

**97. Therefore, if there is no touch or contact,  
Whence is it that feeling takes its rise?  
What purpose is there, then, in all our striving,  
What is it, then, that torments what?**

**Who could be harmed by painful experiences, since there is no such thing as intrinsically and absolutely existing painful sensations?** Therefore, **by examining contact (the cause of sensation) and by examining the nature of sensation itself, we find no intrinsically real sensation or feeling. The conclusion is that these exist only in dependence on other factors, and that nothing whatsoever can exist independently and intrinsically.**

Through such analysis, **we arrive at the important conclusion that neither the experiencer nor its object (the feeling) is truly existent.** Once we have recognised this truth, **the next logical step is to avert craving.** This is presented in the following verse:

**98. Since there is no subject for sensation,  
And sensation, too, lacks all existence,  
Why, when this you clearly understand,  
Will you not pause and turn away from craving?**

Furthermore, says Shantideva, **when we think of the nature of sensation, what grounds do we have to claim that an independently existing feeling or sensation arises? The consciousness, or mind, that is simultaneous to the sensation cannot perceive such an autonomously real sensation.**

99. Seeing, then, and sense of touch  
Are stuff of insubstantial dreams.  
If perceiving consciousness arises simultaneously,  
How could such a feeling be perceived?

100. If the one arises first, the other after,  
Memory occurs and not direct sensation.  
Sensation, then, does not perceive itself,  
And likewise, by another it is not perceived.

101. The subject of sensation has no real existence,  
Thus sensation, likewise, has no being.  
What damage, then, can be inflicted  
On this aggregate deprived of self?

Nor can the moments of consciousness that precede and succeed the sensation perceive that sensation. The preceding moments are no longer present and remain only as imprints at the time of the sensation. And during the subsequent moments of consciousness the sensation remains only an object of recollection. Furthermore, there is no experiencer of the sensation as such. **The conclusion we draw from this is that there is no sensation or feeling with independent reality.** This completes the meditation on the mindfulness of feelings.

### ***Mindfulness on the Emptiness of Mind***

Next comes the meditation on the mindfulness of mind. It begins with **the negation of any independent or intrinsic reality of mental consciousness.**

102. The mind within the senses does not dwell;  
It has no place in outer things, like form,  
And in between, the mind does not abide:  
Not out, not in, not elsewhere can the mind be found.

103. Something not within the body, and yet nowhere else,  
That does not merge with it nor stand apart—  
Something such as this does not exist, not even slightly.  
Beings have nirvana by their nature.

**The mind cannot exist within the body, as the body, or somewhere in between; nor can the mind exist independently of the body. Such a mind is not to be found; the mind is therefore devoid of intrinsic existence. And when beings recognise this nature of their mind, liberation can take place.**

Although we know that consciousness exists, if we analyse and try to locate it within earlier or later moments of its continuum, the idea of consciousness as a unitary entity begins to disappear, just as with the analysis of the body. **Through such analysis we arrive at the absence of intrinsic existence of consciousness. This applies equally to sensory experiences, such as visual perceptions, as they also share the same nature.**

104. If consciousness precedes the cognized object,  
With regard to what does it arise?

If consciousness arises with its object,  
Again, regarding what does it arise?

105ab. If consciousness comes later than its object,  
Once again, from what does it arise?

If a consciousness, such as a sensory perception, arises simultaneously with its object, then they cannot be maintained as sequential; that is, the object exists and then consciousness cognises it. If they were simultaneous, how could an object give rise to a cognition?

If, on the other hand, the object exists first and then consciousness of it comes later, cognition comes only after the cessation of the object. If this were the case, what would that cognition be aware of, for the object has ceased to exist? When we subject sensory perceptions to this kind of critical analysis, they too are revealed to be unfindable, just as in the case of mental consciousness.

### ***Mindfulness of the Emptiness of All Phenomena***

105cd. Thus the origin of all phenomena  
Lies beyond the reach of understanding.

Generally, the argument used to establish the substantial reality of phenomena is that things and events have functions, where specific conditions give rise to certain things and particular circumstances lead to particular events. So we assume that things and events must be real, that they must have substantial reality. This principle of functionality is the key premise the Realists use in asserting the independent existence of things and events. If the Madhyamika is successful in negating the intrinsic existence of these functional entities, then (as Nagarjuna put it in *Stanzas on the Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*) it becomes easier to negate the intrinsic existence of more abstract entities, such as space and time.

Many of these arguments seem to use the principles of the Madhyamaka reasoning known as the *absence of identity and difference*. For example, the divisible and composite nature of material phenomena is explained in terms of directional parts. In the case of consciousness, its composite nature is explained mainly from the point of view of its continuum of moments. With regard to such abstract entities as space and time, we can understand their composite nature in terms of their directions. **So, as long as a thing is divisible (as long as we can break it into composite parts) we can establish its nature as dependent upon its parts. If, on the other hand, a thing were to exist intrinsically as a substantial reality, then that thing would not be dependent upon its parts; it would instead exist as an indivisible and completely discrete entity.**

### **Meditation**

*Meditate now according to your individual choice. You may wish to meditate on emptiness, on impermanence, or on suffering.*