



Nalandabodhi Connecticut
Paramita of the Month Newsletter



"The absolute is not within the reach of the intellect,
For the intellect is grounded in the relative."
-Shantideva, *The Bodhicharyavatara* 9:2

Volume 2 Number 6

This month we conclude our discussion of the six paramitas from Shantideva's Bodhicharyavatara with the 9th chapter's presentation of the perfection of wisdom. Shantideva begins his discussion of wisdom by clarifying the differences between mundane, relative wisdom and the absolute wisdom of enlightenment. In verse 5 Shantideva points out that ordinary persons look on phenomena as real and not illusory. He points out that it is this point of debate on which ordinary people and meditators differ. In verse six he clarifies this statement:

"Forms and so forth, which we sense directly,
Exist by general acclaim, though logic disallows them.
They're false, deceiving, like polluted substances
Regarded in the common view as clean."

Here Shantideva explains to us that things as we normally perceive them can be deceptive. For instance, experiences that we may perceive as pleasant could, in fact, be filled with attachment and thus ultimately be sources of suffering for us. When wisdom is perfected we will recognize experiences for just what they are, without deceptive intellectual shrouds superimposed upon them.

Some might ask "If all is just illusion then how can merit arise through the activities of a buddha? If beings are illusory how can they die and take rebirth? Wouldn't harming another being be no more than harming an illusion, and thus free of negativity?" Shantideva provides us an answer to these questions in verse 11 of chapter 9 where he states "But beings are possessed of mirage like minds, and thus negativity and merit, in consequence arise." Because beings take their minds and appearances to be real, suffering, pleasure, and karma are very real for them. As Shantideva states in verse 10 "As long as the conditions are assembled, illusions, likewise, will persist and manifest." Simply saying something is illusory or like a mirage does not make it so. As long as it is perceived as real then it might as well be real. As long as the appropriate conditions exist it will be real for us. After all, even the sense of reality we impute to objects, thoughts, and the self is of our own making. The only way to break this cycle is to develop the perfect absolute wisdom that is beyond intellectual analysis and then act in accord with the insights that accompany that wisdom.

Some may further inquire, "If all is illusion then what is it that sees this illusion?" You might suggest that the mind itself must have a true existence since it is the perceiver of the mirage. One might suggest that the mind can know itself, and can remember what it knows, thus it must be real. Shantideva points out in verse 23 of chapter 9 of the Bodhicharyavatara that "it's

from the link with outer things that memory occurs." Without an outer object of perception the idea of a perceiver, the idea of a mind, cannot itself be rationalized. Both the mind and its objects arise in interdependence upon each other. The reality of one is no more valid than that of the other.

Shantideva further reminds us that such intellectual analysis can be a trap in and of itself. In verse 25 he states:

"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."

Here we are reminded that our goal is to undermine the sense of solidity and truthfulness that we impute to our perceptions of phenomena. Our purpose is not to refute the *appearance* of their reality, but to weaken our clinging to that appearance in order to allow true wisdom to dawn.

Some may ask, if I recognize all phenomena as being illusory, how will this dispel afflictive passions? Even having an intellectual understanding of the illusory nature of phenomena can still leave us in a position of suffering from afflictive emotions that arise from these appearances. Intellectual understanding itself cannot alleviate this suffering. Shantideva explains in verses 30 and 31 that the reason for this is that we "have not rid ourselves of habits of desiring objects of perception. When we gaze upon such things our aptitude for emptiness is weak indeed." Here Shantideva suggests that the true perfection of wisdom entails not just accepting or understanding emptiness in an intellectual way but requires that we bring such understanding into our experience of the world.

Shantideva continues his discussion of the perfection of wisdom by outlining and refuting several wrong views of emptiness. These are presented as views that might hinder our progress on the path to the perfection of wisdom. The first of these wrong views presented by Shantideva is the view that liberation occurs and perfect wisdom is attained when the defilements are completely forsaken. Shantideva points out in verses 45 through 48 of chapter 9 that while such persons are free of the cravings created through defiled emotions, they are not free of the influence of karma. He states:

"How could they avoid the craving linked with ignorance?
This craving is produced by virtue of sensation,
And sensation, this they surely have.
Concepts linger still within their minds;
And it is to these concepts that they cling.

The mind that has not realized voidness,
May be halted, but will once again arise-
Just as from a nonperceptual absorption."

Shantideva cautions us to beware of concepts that can still linger after the abandonment of defiled emotions. Such abandonment does not represent the fruition of the perfection of wisdom. Subtle concepts still remain within the mind that must be addressed.

The second wrong view that Shantideva addresses is the concept of a truly existent "I". Shantideva proceeds to refute the idea of a truly existent self by examining the various bases for such a self. He examines the body, the various consciousnesses, thoughts, and finds no basis or support for the existence of mind. He points out in verse 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."

It is our sense of self that is the source of all sorrow. Shantideva suggests that meditation on the lack of self is thus the path to perfect wisdom and the alleviation of suffering.

Shantideva then proceeds to analyze one of the sources of this sense of self, the body, and shows that it has no real existence. The "body" cannot be found in the arms, the legs, or the torso. Indeed no one part can be seen to be the body. We only perceive a body when all the proper parts are assembled. As Shantideva states in verse 84:

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

Further, Shantideva states, this analysis can be applied to all forms:

"These parts themselves will break down into atoms,
And atoms will divide according to direction.
These fragments, too, will also fall too nothing.
Thus atoms are like empty space - they have no real existence.

All form, therefore, is like a dream,
And who will be attached to it, who thus investigates?"

Clinging to forms and to the body leads to solidifying the sense of self. Analysis of these forms shows them to be illusory in nature. Shantideva instructs that such investigation is an antidote to the wrong view of reification that can hinder our progress towards perfect wisdom.

Next Shantideva confronts feelings and emotions and their reification. In verse 98 he states:

"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?"

Shantideva points out that based upon the previous analysis, if forms are merely illusory, then what basis can there be for sensation? As he states "seeing, then, and sense of touch are stuff of insubstantial dreams." The sense of self and the mind cannot lie within the realm of sensations and perceptions, as they too are insubstantial. Shantideva concludes:

"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."

Both reification of the internal and the external are wrong views that can hinder beings on the path to the perfection of wisdom. Shantideva also refutes the view that both the internal and the external have some true existence that arises in simultaneity. He states:

"If objects show that consciousness exists,
What, in turn, upholds the truth of objects?
If both subsist through mutual dependence,
Both thereby will lose their true existence."

While "at times direct perception of the world perceives that all things have their causes," such perceptions are conceptual in nature and fail to hold up to detailed analysis. We are left with the conclusion that no conceptual framework can truly describe the ultimate nature; that the perfection of wisdom does not lie within the conceptual realm.

Shantideva further warns us of the dangers of the wrong view of nihilism as well:

"When in a dream, a child has died,
The state of mind which thinks he is no more
Will overwhelm the thought that he was living.
And yet, both thoughts are equally deceptive."

We should not fall into the morass of thinking that because conceptual constructs cannot adequately describe the true nature of things, that nothing therefore exists. Thoughts of both reification and non-existence are both equally conceptual and equally deceptive. "What arises through the meeting of conditions and ceases to exist when these are lacking, is artificial like the mirror image." Shantideva states:

"Wandering beings, thus, resemble dreams
No difference is there, in their own true nature,
Between the states of suffering and beyond all sorrow."

Shantideva closes his exposition by giving us some advice on how to pursue the path to the perfection of wisdom. These words of advice form a fitting close to this month's newsletter. I hope that you may find them to be a source of inspiration in your search for the perfection of wisdom:

"Pain and pleasure, whence do these arise?
And what is there to give me joy and sorrow?
In this quest and search for perfect truth,
Who is craving, what is there to crave?"

Examine now this world of living beings:
Who is there therein to pass away?
What is there to come, and what has been?
And who, indeed, are relatives and friends?"

May beings like myself discern and grasp
That all things have the character of space!
But those who long for happiness and ease,
Through disputes or the cause of pleasures,

Are deeply troubled or else thrilled with joy.
They suffer, strive, contend among themselves,
Slashing, stabbing, injuring each other:
They live their life engulfed by many evils.

Sad it is indeed that living beings,
Carried on the flood of bitter pain,
However terrible their plight may be,
Do not perceive they suffer so!

When shall I reveal this truth of emptiness
To those who go to ruin through belief in substance?"

References:

1. *The Way of the Bodhisattva* Shantideva (1997) Shambhala Press.