Chapter 11 Key Arguments Refuting Intrinsic Existence (verses 116 - 167)

Commentary

In the next subsection, verses 116-50, **Shantideva presents various arguments for refuting inherent existence, such as the diamond splinters argument, the argument of identity and difference, the reasoning of interdependent origination, and the reasoning of existence and nonexistence. The diamond splinters argument refutes the inherent existence of phenomena by examining causation with a fourfold analysis. The argument of identity and difference negates the inherent existence of phenomena by examining their essential natures. This argument can be further elaborated into different forms, such as the fivefold reasoning and sevenfold reasoning. The reasoning of existence and nonexistence analyses the effects of things and events, examining whether those effects are existent or nonexistent. A further form of this argument that analyses from the point of view of both cause and effect; asking whether one cause leads to many effects, or whether multiple causes lead to one effect. Finally, there is the reasoning of dependent origination, which is really the king of all reasoning.**

The Diamond Splinters Argument

We begin with the reasoning of the diamond splinters. **The text makes the observation that the conventional mind perceives through direct experience all sorts of causes. For example, the distinct parts of a lotus, such as its stalk, result from distinct causes.**

> 116. At times direct perception of the world
> Perceives that all things have their causes.
> The different segments of the lotus flower
> Arise from a similar diversity of causes.
> 117. “But what gives rise,” you ask, “to such diversity of causes?”
> An ever-earlier variety of cause, we say.
> “And how,” you ask, “do certain fruits derive from certain causes?”
> Through the power, we answer, of preceding causes.

Generally speaking, the distinction between existent and nonexistent is made on the basis of whether something is established by a valid cognition. Within the category of existing things, some things come into being occasionally, and some are ever present. The fact that something comes into being only occasionally indicates that a cause or a condition must have given rise to it, while an ever present phenomenon does not appear to require such precedents. We can thus observe two principal classes of phenomena; those that depend on causes and conditions and those that do not. In addition, those occasional phenomena are by nature impermanent, and those phenomena that are always present are called permanent.

Whether it be the external environment or the sentient beings inhabiting it, they all come into being by depending on causes and conditions. They do not come into being causelessly. What then are their causes? Furthermore, the multiplicity of effects must correspond to their causes. In other words, diverse effects must have diverse causes. What gives rise to this multiplicity of causes? Shantideva presents the Madhyamika’s response that a preceding variety of causes give rise to them. In other words, a multiplicity of causes comes about due to a multiplicity of earlier causes. The text then reads, **“And how...do certain fruits derive from certain causes?” That is, what enables causes to produce certain types of effects? Again, the answer is that they are able to do this due to their preceding causes.**

After refuting the notion (in the first part of the diamond splinters argument) that things and events could come into being without a cause, Shantideva next refutes the idea that things and events can come into being from a permanent cause. In the following verses, the candidates for a permanent original cause of the universe (such as the primal substance or *Ishvara*, the divine creator) are rejected.

> 118. If Ishvara is held to be the cause of beings,
> You must now define for us his nature.
> If, by this, you simply mean the elements,
> No need to tire ourselves disputing names!

If, Shantideva argues, Ishvara is held to be the cause of beings, then the proponents of this argument must now define his nature. However, if by *Ishvara* you are simply referring to the elements, then, says Shantideva, even we Madhyamikas accept that elements are the causes and conditions of things and events. So why give it an exotic name like Ishvara? If Ishvara is identical to the elements, since there are multiple elements, then Ishvara too will become multiple, impermanent, inert; in other words, not divine.

> 119. Yet earth and other elements are many,

Impermanent, inert, without divinity.
Trampled underfoot, they are impure,
And thus they cannot be a God Omnipotent.

120. The Deity cannot be Space—inert and lifeless.
He cannot be the Self, for this we have refuted.
He's inconceivable, they say. Then likewise his creatorship.
Is there any point, therefore, to such a claim?

121. What is it he wishes to create?
Has he made the self and all the elements?
But are not self and elements and he, himself, eternal?
And consciousness, we know, arises from its object.

And further, by being an element, Ishvara can be trampled upon. Ishvara would therefore be impure. How can that be God? Also, Ishvara cannot be said to be space because he would be inert and lifeless. Nor can he be said to be the self, which was refuted earlier. If we maintain that Ishvara is an inconceivable entity, then nothing could be said about it, and so, Shantideva asks, what point is there in making such claims? Furthermore, what is the wish of such a creator? Has he made the self and all the elements? Are not self and the elements Ishvara himself? Also, Shantideva points out, we know consciousness, for example, to arise from its object, not from Ishvara.

Shantideva now states the Madhyamika's own position; that **pleasure and pain come about due to past karmic actions. So he asks the opponent, what exactly is created by Ishvara?**

122. Pain and pleasure have, from all time, sprung from karma,
So tell us, what has this Divinity produced?
And if creation's cause is un-originate,
How can origin be part of the result?

123. Why are creatures not created constantly,
For Ishvara relies on nothing but himself?
And if there's nothing that he has not made,
What remains on which he might depend?

Because Ishvara is, according to the proponents of this idea, a permanent creator, he can have no beginning; therefore, cause has no beginning. If cause has no beginning, Shantideva asks, how can effects have any beginning? Moreover, if the cause is permanent, how can we speak of it producing something? We cannot speak of a causal production, because in order for an effect to be produced by a cause, there needs to be a condition for the cause to exist. Since everything is created by Ishvara, how can Ishvara (the cause) depend upon conditions? On the other hand, if the creator Ishvara is dependent on conditions, then the effects (things and events) come into being through a combination of Ishvara and Ishvara's conditions. This destroys the thesis that all things and events are created by Ishvara as a single, solitary cause.

Practicing Wisdom

Two Kinds of Causation

I would like to take a few moments to **explore further the connection between karmic and natural causation.** As Shantideva has stated, **the truth of the situation is that consciousness, or perception, arises in dependence upon an object by taking on the aspect of the particular object. Therefore, consciousness and perception arise in dependence upon objects. Consciousness, as far as its basic nature of luminosity and awareness is concerned, is beginningless. Every moment of consciousness is a result, or product, of its preceding moment; this continuum is beginningless. Sensations and experiences such as joy and pain are products of karma and action.**

While experiences of pain and joy come about as a result of karma, all material phenomena come about due to their preceding substantial causes. As I mentioned earlier, **there seem to be two causal processes working in parallel. On the one hand is the natural law of cause and effect, which is independent of karma. When sentient beings' experience of pain and pleasure enters the picture, karma also enters. At that point, there seems to be a 2nd level of natural, karmic law of cause and effect.**

According to the tradition of upper Abhidharma, karma is defined as a mental event. However, the Prasangika-Madhyamika accepts physical, or bodily, karma as well. **Generally karma must be understood in terms of action.** In our everyday life, **almost everything we experience comes about as a result of actions. Without action, there is no life. We act due to our natural aspiration to seek happiness and overcome suffering. One of the most critical elements of action is the motivation. When we take the factor of motivation into account, then the nature of action (whether positive, negative, or neutral, and to whatever degree) becomes a rather complex question. A state of mind motivated by an afflictive emotion gives rise to impulsive, often negative, actions, whether bodily or verbal, and these negative actions produce corresponding consequences.** We can understand this from our daily experience; it is easily observable. Our existence as human beings is said to be the product of virtuous karma; meritorious actions accumulated in the past.

As far as the material continua of our human aggregates, or *skandhas*, is concerned (especially our physical aggregates) we can trace their origins even to the beginning of the present universe, and they should be there even at the point *before* the evolution of our current universe. So in terms of their continua, the aggregates are beginningless. As far as the causal relationship between the various stages of an inanimate material continuum is concerned, I do not think karma plays any role. That an earlier instant gives rise to a later instant by means of a normal, causal process is purely a function of a natural law. Many transformations of material substances happen as a result of elemental changes at the material level.

However, when we speak of an element that is part of an animate body, then I feel that it has some connection to karma. As far as the evolution or origination of an element itself is concerned, I do not think that has any connection with karma, but when an element has the capacity or potential to affect an individual sentient being's experience, I think karma does enter into the picture. From the point of view of Buddhist cosmology, before the evolution of the current universal system, *space particles* existed that gradually evolved through interaction into grosser physical matter, such as subatomic particles, atoms, and molecules. Vajrayana texts mention both external and internal elements. Internal elements are finally traced to the most refined elements, which are explained in terms of the e*nergy winds (pranas)*, which flow through subtle physical channels. The texts also acknowledge an association between the external elements and the internal channels and winds. Perhaps it is at this level that we can locate the basis for the connection with karma. If karma does indeed provide the connection between the external and internal elements, then on this basis, we may be able to account for how inert material substances later become animate enough to serve as the basis for consciousness and sensations. I feel that it is through the understanding of this idea of the subtle energy winds found in the Vajrayana texts that we can possibly find a link between karma and the material world. This is, of course, the speculation of an individual. It is nothing conclusive.

Commentary

Continuing the Diamond Splinters Argument

Next Shantideva explains that if the aggregation of causes and conditions is the cause of things and events, then the idea of Ishvara being the cause loses its coherence, for **when causes and conditions come into being and are aggregated, no other force can prevent the fruition of the results. Even Ishvara would have to depend on the aggregation to be able to produce anything.**

124. If Ishvara depends, the cause of all
Is prior circumstances, and no longer he.
When these obtain, he cannot but create;
When these are absent, he is powerless to make.

125. If almighty God does not intend,
But yet creates, another thing has forced him.
If he wishes to create he's swayed by his desire.
Even though Creator, then, what comes of his omnipotence?

If Ishvara acts without desiring to act (in other words, is forced) it would follow that he is under the control of something else. Even if Ishvara acts with the desire to act, then he would be conditioned by desire. In that case, what remains of the concept of a divinity, a creator, or a single unitary cause?

The Vaisheshikas hold that permanent, indivisible atoms are the foundations, or creators, of the physical universe. So Shantideva briefly turns his attention to this notion, and says that this view was refuted earlier.

126. Those who say that atoms are the permanent foundation
Have indeed already been refuted.
The Samkhyas are the ones who hold
The Primal Substance as enduring cause.

127. "Pleasure," "pain," "neutrality," so-called,
Are qualities that, when they rest
In equilibrium, are termed the Primal Substance.
The universe arises when they are disturbed.

128. Three natures in a unity are disallowed;
This unity, therefore, cannot exist.
These qualities, likewise, have no existence,
For they must also be assigned a triple nature.

129. If these qualities have no existence,
A thing like sound is very far from plausible!
And cloth, and other mindless objects,
Cannot be the seat of feelings such as pleasure.

Then he turns to the views of the Samkhya school, in particular its concept of *primal substance* as the basic creator of the entire universe. The Samkhyas define *primal substance* as the state of equilibrium of three forces (goodness, passion, and darkness) and assert it to be the underlying cause or foundation of

the entire physical universe. Shantideva refutes this notion by stating that if the primal substance were a single, unitary entity, we could not define it as an equilibrium of three qualities. This would contradict the Samkhyas' own tenets, according to which even these three qualities are said to be composed of three further qualities. Therefore, Shantideva argues, in the final analysis, a coherent notion of a unitary, single entity cannot be sustained. Also, in the Samkhya view, pain, pleasure, and neutrality ultimately become permanent. However, given that they are states of feeling, how can they be permanent? How can something permanent be described in terms of sensations or states of feeling, which are observably fleeting?

Next Shantideva addresses the Samkhyas' view that everything exists at their causal stage:

130. "But," you say, "these things possess the nature of their cause."
But have we not investigated "things" already?
For you the cause is pleasure and the like,
But from pleasure, cloth has never sprung!

131. Pleasure, rather, is produced from cloth,
But this is nonexistent, therefore pleasure likewise.
As for permanence of pleasure and the rest—
Well, there's a thing that's never been observed.

Shantideva rejects this assertion by stating that it contradicts our direct experience, which affirms the sequential process of the arising of cause and effect. **The causal stage is when the effect has not yet come into being, and the effect stage is when the cause has already ceased to exist.** Therefore, Shantideva concludes that in the Samkhya view of primal substance, the very concept of cause and effect and their sequential order becomes untenable.

In the following verses, Shantideva rejects pleasure, pain, and the sensations as being truly existent.

132. If pleasure and the rest are true existents,
Why are they not constantly perceived?
And if you claim they take on subtle form,
How can coarseness change, transforming into subtlety?

133. If coarseness is abandoned, subtlety assumed,
Such transition indicates impermanence.
Why then not accept that, in this way,
All things will have the character of transience?

134. If you say the coarser aspect is itself the pleasure,
The manifest sensation is of course impermanent.
And what does not exist in any sense,
Because it has no being, cannot manifest.

135. You do not intend that what is manifest
Lacked earlier existence—yet this is the meaning.
And if results exist within their cause,
Those who eat their food, consume their excrement.

136. And likewise with the money they would spend on clothing,
Let them rather buy the cotton grain to wear.
"But," you say, "the world is ignorant and blind."
Since this is taught by those who know the truth,

137. This knowledge must be present in the worldly.
And if they have it, why do they not see?
You say, "The views of worldly folk are false."
Therefore, what they clearly see has no validity.

In the following verse Shantideva presents a possible objection to the Madhyamikas from the Samkhyas' standpoint:

138. "But if there is no truth in their cognition,
All that it assesses is perforce deceptive.
Meditation on the supreme truth of emptiness
Ceases, therefore, to have any meaning."

The Samkhyas could assert that the Madhyamaka position appears to accept different types of valid cognitions, such as direct perception and inferential cognition. Madhyamikas also seem to maintain that these ways of knowing are, in some sense, deceptive and therefore not ultimately valid. If that is so, the Samkhyas are saying, how can these deceptive cognitions ascertain even everyday objects that are said to exist? Wouldn't the objects too become false and unreal? And if this is so, the Samkhyas argue, doesn't that then mean that emptiness itself becomes unreal and meditation on emptiness useless?

The Madhyamika responds to this by accepting the consequence that, generally speaking, objects that are established by deceptive cognitions must also be unreal and false.

139. If there is no object for analysis,
There can be no grasping of its nonexistence.

Therefore, a deceptive object of whatever kind
Will also have an emptiness equally deceptive.

The Prasangika-Madhyamikas maintain that the valid cognition of emptiness (and indeed emptiness, too, in the final analysis) lacks absolute existence. So the Prasangika-Madhyamikas respond, "Yes, we agree, **just as the cognition ascertaining emptiness is deceptive, similarly emptiness too is devoid of ultimate existence.**"

In relation to this verse, Minyak Künsö's commentary observes that there is no emptiness unrelated to or independent of an object. That is, the emptiness of a vase is necessarily associated with the vase. There can be no independently existing emptiness of the vase separate from the vase. So when the theory of emptiness is contemplated, we take an existing entity (be it an object or an event) and then use the argument of dependent origination to establish it. **Because things and events exist only by dependence on other factors, they are empty of self, or intrinsic existence. Since the object is unreal and false and therefore not truly existent, the emptiness that is the quality or nature of that phenomenon will also ultimately be unreal and ultimately not truly existent.**

In the next verse, Shantideva uses an analogy to further illustrate this point.

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

The analogy is that if you dream that your child dies, then in the dream you will think "Now my child no longer exists" and feel sorrow as a result. This very thought of your child's nonexistence prevents the thought of his existence arising. However, this too is false.

All things and events can be analysed from both the conventional viewpoint and the absolute viewpoint, and so are said to have two natures, or two truths; conventional and ultimate truth. When we examine an object such as a vase and analyse whether it exists inherently or not, what we find is its emptiness. **When we then take that emptiness as the object of our analysis and examine whether it too exists inherently or not, what we then find is the emptiness of emptiness. So even emptiness, when analysed regarding the ultimate nature of its existence, is revealed to enjoy the same status as all other objects; it too has no intrinsic existence.**

Typically, emptiness is taken as ultimate truth. However, when we take emptiness itself as the object of an ultimate analysis, emptiness becomes a conventional truth. Emptiness has, in some sense, "shifted its position," and we see that it too is devoid of intrinsic existence, and is thus, in this relative frame of reference, a conventional truth.

Shantideva concludes the diamond splinters argument:

141. Therefore, as we see through such investigation,
Nothing is that does not have a cause;
And nothing is existent in its causes
Taken one by one or in the aggregate.

142ab. It does not come from somewhere else,
Neither does it stay, nor yet depart.

At this point in his commentary, Minyak Künsö says of all things and events that "their ultimate nature is beyond notions of permanence and nihilism."

The Great Dependent Origination Argument

Next is the reasoning of dependent origination, which is said to be the *king of all reasoning* in establishing the emptiness of inherent existence. The reason for this epithet of the *king* or *chief* of all proofs is that all forms of logical argument establishing emptiness must, either directly or indirectly, be rooted in the idea of dependent origination. Using dependent origination as a logical basis to establish the emptiness of all things and events confers a unique advantage: through the applying this reasoning, we not only avoid the extreme of absolutism but also the extreme of nihilism.

So, in the following verses Shantideva explains that **any thing or event that comes into being in dependence on its parts, causes and conditions, or conceptual designation is like a mirage, or a magic illusion; it is, in some sense, fabricated. Like the reflection of a form in a mirror, which arises naturally when an object is placed in front of it, all things and events are created through their dependence on many factors, as a result of the aggregation of many conditions.**

142cd. How will what confusion takes for truth
In any sense be different from a mirage?

143. Things, then, bodied forth by magic spells,
And that which is displayed by dint of causes—
"Whence have these arisen?" we should ask;
And where they go to, that we should examine!

144. What arises through the meeting of conditions
And ceases to exist when these are lacking,
Is artificial like the mirror image;
How can true existence be ascribed to it?

So dependent origination can be understood at several different levels; dependence on causes and conditions, dependence on component parts, and dependence on conceptual designation, in other words labels and concepts.

The Tibetan term *tenjung* is a composite of two syllables meaning *dependently (ten)* and *originated (jung)*, and this term implies a middle way that is free of the two extremes of permanence and nihilism. According to this implication, all things and events are understood to emerge by depending on other causes and conditions. This idea of *dependence* negates absolutism by demonstrating that things and events do not enjoy any independent status; that lack of autonomy precludes the possibility of substantial reality. *Origination*, however, implies existence and affirms the reality of the relative world, meaning that we can (even in the face of emptiness) sustain the validity of such notions as cause and effect, samsara and nirvana, and so on. So the very meaning of the term *dependent origination* suggests the negation of the extremes of both absolutism and nihilism.

The Argument in Terms of Existence and Nonexistence

Next is the argument concerning the origination and cessation of entities and nonentities. It is presented mainly from the point of view of the effect, or fruition.

145. Something that exists with true existence—
What need is there for it to have a cause?
Something that is wholly nonexistent—
Again, what need has it to have a cause?

146. Even by a hundred million causes,
No transformation is there in nonentity.
For if this keeps its status, how could entity occur?
And likewise, what is there that could so change?

147. When nonbeing prevails, if there's no being,
When could being ever supervene?
For insofar as entity does not occur,
Nonentity itself will not depart.

148. And if nonentity is not dispersed,
No chance is there for entity to manifest.
Being cannot change and turn to nonbeing,
Otherwise it has a double nature.

149. Thus there is no being,
Likewise no cessation.
Therefore beings, each and every one,
Are unborn and are never ceasing.

If things exist independently, enjoying a discrete and intrinsic existence, what need is there for a cause? If things exist inherently, truly, and autonomously, then a cause will have no role to play, because the role of causes is to bring effects into being.

Having thus negated intrinsic origination and cessation, the conclusion arrived at is that processes such as origination and cessation can be understood only in terms of mere conditionality. When understood in this way, we are able to see the fundamental equality of samsara and nirvana. This is because, from the perspective of their emptiness of intrinsic existence, there is no difference whatsoever between samsara and nirvana.

Shantideva concludes this argument with the following statement:

150. Wandering beings, thus, resemble dreams
And also the banana tree, if you examine well.
No difference is there, in their own true nature,
Between the states of suffering and beyond-all-sorrow.

Aspiring to Realise the Wisdom of Emptiness

Shantideva now concludes the wisdom chapter by describing the benefits of contemplating emptiness. He says that understanding emptiness will firstly ensure that we do not become enslaved by mundane concerns; in fact, we will be able to trample upon worldly conventions. Secondly, we enhance our potential for compassion by training our mind in this wisdom. Shantideva lists these as the two principal benefits of meditating on emptiness.

151. Thus, with things devoid of true existence,
What is there to gain, and what to lose?

Who is there to pay me court and honours,
And who is there to scorn and to revile me?

152. 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?

153. 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?

154. 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,

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

156. From time to time they surface in the states of bliss,
Abandoning themselves to many pleasures.
But dying, down they fall to suffer torment,
Long, unbearable, in realms of sorrow.

157. Many are the chasms and abysses of existence,
Where the truth of emptiness is not found.
All is contradiction, all denial,
Suchness[19] or its like, can find no place.

158. There, exceeding all description,
Is the shoreless sea of pain unbearable.
Here it is that strength is low,
And lives are flickering and brief.

159. All activities for sake of life and health,
Relief of hunger and of weariness,
Time consumed in sleep, all accident and injury,
And sterile friendships with the childish—

160. Thus life passes quickly, meaningless.
True discernment—hard it is to have!
How then shall we ever find the means
To curb the futile wanderings of the mind?

161. Further, evil forces work and strain
To cast us headlong into states of woe;
Manifold are false, deceptive trails,
And it is hard to dissipate our doubts.

162. Hard it is to find again this state of freedom,
Harder yet to come upon enlightened teachers,
Hard, indeed, to turn aside the torrent of defilement!
Alas, our sorrows fall in endless streams!

163. 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!

164. Some there are who bathe themselves repeatedly,
And afterward they scorch themselves with fire,
Suffering intensely all the while,
Yet there they stay, proclaiming loud their bliss.

165. Likewise there are some who live and act
As though old age and death will never come to them.
But then life's over, and there comes
The dreadful fall into the states of loss.

166. When shall I be able to allay and quench

[19] The way things really are, or the nature of reality itself.

The dreadful heat of suffering's blazing fires,
With plenteous rains of my own bliss
That pour torrential from my clouds of merit?

167. My wealth of merit gathered in,
With reverence but without conceptual aim,
When shall I reveal this truth of emptiness
To those who go to ruin through belief in substance?

With this, a brief exposition of the ninth chapter of Shantideva's *The Way of the Bodhisattva* is completed.

Meditation

Let us meditate now on perceiving all sentient beings as having an illusion-like nature, as explained in the conclusion of Shantideva's ninth chapter. We can observe the futility of generating strong fluctuating emotional states, such as anger and jealousy, toward others. Although sentient beings are like illusions, they also feel pain and joy. Reflect upon the empty nature of self and others, and try to overcome the forces of these negative tendencies, the afflictive emotions such as anger and desire. Then reflect that all sentient beings possess the potential for freedom from suffering, and with that awareness, generate strong compassion toward all sentient beings. Let us try to meditate, for about five minutes, by cultivating such compassion.