

## Meditation, Philosophy, and the Bodhisattva Path in the Indian Madhyamaka

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**Abstract:** This paper will explore the relationship between “meditation” and “philosophy” in the works of two major Indian Madhyamaka philosophers: Bhāviveka (sixth century) and Śāntideva. It will argue that both thinkers thought of mental concentration (*samādhi*), mindfulness (*smṛti*), and meditation on the repulsive state of the body (*aśubha-bhāvanā*) as important prerequisites for the intellectual study of Emptiness. But it will argue that the “meditation” and “philosophy” are not necessarily as separate as they might seem. Particularly in the practice of compassion (*karuṇā*), the philosophical attitudes of Emptiness inform and enliven meditative practice, so that these two forms of Buddhist practice can be seen as complementary and mutually reinforcing components of the bodhisattva path.

Greetings everyone! My name is David Eckel. I am going to be speaking to you today about  
“Meditation, Philosophy, and the Bodhisattva Path in Indian Madhyamaka.”

I’d like to begin by thanking the organizers of this conference, especially the Venerable Soegwang Sunim, for the privilege of speaking to you today in the Second Seoul International Meditation Festival. It is a great honor, once again, to join a forum sponsored by Dongguk University. I have tremendous respect for all you do to promote the study of Buddhism in Korea and around the world. I am sorry that I cannot speak to you in person, but I appreciate the opportunity to speak to you by a recorded message. While the COVID crisis in many respects has kept us apart, I feel that it also has allowed us to establish connections that in other times would have been difficult or even impossible. I am with you in spirit and share your interest in Buddhist meditation.

As a professor of Buddhist philosophy, I often meet Buddhist practitioners who ask me whether I practice meditation. I explain that I am a scholar and my practice of meditation is to study Buddhist philosophy. When I say this, I am not just trying to avoid the question. I believe that the study of Buddhist philosophy can be a form of meditation, as is true in some traditions of Western philosophy. But I will not try to make that argument in this lecture, at least I will not try

to make it directly. Instead, I would like to focus on the way a number of important Madhyamaka philosophers in India presuppose some form of meditation as preparation for the study of philosophy. By understanding how they situate philosophy in relation to meditative practice, I think we can develop a more nuanced understanding of what I take to be the topic of this conference: the connection between meditation and other forms of Buddhist life.

Since time is short and the questions are complex, I would like to focus on a genre of literature that will be particularly promising. This is the genre of the Madhyamaka “introduction” to the bodhisattva path. The best-known example of this type of literature is Śāntideva’s “Introduction to the Practice of Awakening” (*bodhicaryāvatāra*), but this literature is rooted in an earlier text known as the “Introduction to the Nectar of Reality” (*tattvāmṛtāvatāra*) by the sixth-century Madhyamaka philosopher Bhāviveka. In many respects, Bhāviveka’s text is eminently “philosophical.” It contains a long analysis of the categories accepted by the different schools that were active in Bhāviveka’s time. These included not only the Abhidharma, but also the Hindu traditions of the Sāṃkhya and Vaiśeṣika. Later, in an extension of the same text, he took up the Yogācāra, the Vedānta, and even the Jains. This analysis holds great interest for scholars of Indian philosophy, but what should interest us is not the analysis itself, but the connection Bhāviveka draws between his philosophy and the discipline of meditation.

Bhāviveka begins the “philosophical” portion of his text, known as “The Quest for the Knowledge of Reality” (*tattva-jñānaiṣaṇā*), with a series of verses in praise of knowledge (*jñāna*) and wisdom (*prajñā*).<sup>1</sup> For him the two terms mean essentially the same thing: the knowledge that philosophers seek is the wisdom that animates the path of a bodhisattva. He likes to think of knowledge as a way of seeing.

- 3.1 True vision consists of knowledge and nothing else; so a wise person should concentrate on seeking knowledge of reality.

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<sup>1</sup> The Sanskrit text of the verses in this portion of the text is found in Annette L. Heitmann, ed., Annette L., *Textkritischer Beitrag zu Bhavyas Madhyamakahrdayakārikā, Kapitel 1–3*, Copenhagen: Videnskabsbutikkens Forlag, Københavns Universitet, 1998. The translations are mine.

- 3.2 Even if a wise person is blind, he can see the world without any obstruction; he sees whatever he wants to see, whether it is far away, subtle, or concealed.
- 3.3 Even if someone has a thousand eyes [like the god Indra] and lacks wisdom, he is blind, because he does not see the right and wrong paths to heaven and liberation.
- 3.4 When someone opens the eye of wisdom, he does not enter into the perfections as if they were thorns poisoned by hope for results in this world or the next.

Bhāviveka's depiction of knowledge as a kind of sight is not surprising in a tradition where one of the most common words for philosophy is simply "vision" (*darśana*), but he weaves this image of vision together in a clever way with the basic Buddhist idea of practice as a way of moving along a path. For him, a wise person not just someone who can see the right path to liberation, but someone who can walk this path without falling into the thorns that line the path. Both these metaphors—seeing and walking—come into play when Bhāviveka talks about philosophers and the practice of meditation.

The key verses begin with a line saying: "a wise person [that is, someone who intends to practice philosophy] should diligently practice mental concentration." Here the word for "concentration" is *samādhi*, one of the fundamental Buddhist words for meditation. Why is concentration so important? Bhāviveka answers first with a verse about vision:

- 3.15 You cannot see your face in muddy or turbulent water, and you cannot see reality in a mind that is not concentrated and is covered by obstructions.

Then he adds another verse about leading the mind onto the right path:

- 3.16 When your mind (*manas*) strays from the right path like an elephant, you should tie it to the post of its object with the rope of mindfulness and gradually bring it under control with the hook of wisdom.

These verses are embedded in a remarkably detailed account of the practice a philosopher should use to achieve this concentration. He begins, unsurprisingly, with an account of mindfulness:

How should [a wise person] concentrate the mind? By being mindful of the out-breath and the in-breath (*ānāpāna-smṛti*). Here, exhaling pushes [the breath] out and inhaling draws it in. One should locate mindfulness of these two [breaths] on the tip of the nose and then count. First, count forward when exhaling--starting with ten and going up to a hundred--then do the same in reverse. Or one should practice mindfulness of breathing another way: Exhaling pushes the breath out as long, hot, and foul-smelling. Inhaling

draws the breath in as short, cold, and sweet-smelling. One should be mindful of these [breaths] as arising from the navel and extending to the tip of the nose, [extending] also through the whole body to the tips of the toes.

I wonder how students would respond in my seminar on Buddhist philosophy if I insisted that we start every class with a few minutes of mindful breathing. I imagine it would change the tone of the class, probably for the better.

But Bhāviveka does not stop with an account of mindfulness. He goes on to discuss what might loosely be called “motivational” practices. Perhaps these are familiar to you from your own practice of meditation. He says that someone who is puffed up by pride about family, youth, or physical appearance, should be calm their pride by contemplating impermanence. Someone whose mind is narrow should expand the mind by concentrating on something vast, like a large sutra. If the mind is distracted, it should be focused by considering the suffering that results from distractions. If it is depressed, it should be lifted up by considering the advantages of courage. If it is stained by the mud of passion, hatred, and delusion, it should be washed by the water of revulsion, friendliness, and dependent arising. Finally, when the mind has become isolated, stable, peaceful, focused on its object, skillful, and supple, the practitioner should cultivate detachment even toward the mind itself. It is only when the mind has been concentrated like this that a scholar is ready, cognitively and emotionally, to analyze the nature of reality.

I do not imagine that Bhāviveka is unique in insisting on a preliminary discipline of mental concentration for aspiring scholars. But he has an unusually broad and encyclopedic imagination. His philosophical works tell us more about the details of his opponents’ views than almost any other text from his period, so much so, that he is a unique source for information about subjects as different as the schools of Nikāya (or Mainstream) Buddhism and the origins of non-dual Vedānta. It is not surprising that he gives us a distinctive view of the meditative preparation for a Buddhist philosopher. For Bhāviveka, the analysis of reality was not just a dry, academic discipline. It was embedded within a larger system of Buddhist practice. It would not be

surprising to find a similar connection between meditation and philosophical practice in the work of later Mādhyamikas, especially those who helped carry the tradition to Tibet.

What I would like to do next, however, is step back, broaden the focus, and ask a larger question about the relationship between the analysis of reality and the practice of the bodhisattva path. Bhāviveka suggests this connection in the titles of the two chapters that precede his “Quest for the Knowledge of Reality.” The first is “Not Relinquishing the Mind of Awakening” (*bodhicittāparityāga*); the second is “Taking the Vow of an Ascetic” (*munivratasamāśraya*). By the time Bhāviveka gets to the analytical portion of his text--the portion that we have identified as “philosophical--he already has laid a foundation in the basic principles of the bodhisattva path, including the practice of compassion (*karuṇā*) and generating the mind of awakening (*bodhicitta*). What is the relationship between philosophy and these more fundamental Mahāyāna values? To answer this question, I would like to turn the clock forward a few centuries to another work in the same genre of Madhyamaka literature, the “Introduction to the Practice of Awakening” (*bodhicaryāvatāra*) but the 8th-century Mādhyamika Śāntideva.

Śāntideva’s text has become justifiably famous in scholarly circles for its marriage of Buddhist philosophy and Buddhist practice. Opening the text, it is easy to see why. It begins with a remarkably astute description of the emotional dynamic involved in the generating the mind of enlightenment, the fundamental aspiration that motivates the progress of a bodhisattva. It is framed in the context of a ritual, in which the practitioner confesses his own inadequacy, offers the mind in homage to great Buddhas and bodhisattvas, and then receives it back as a mark of being accepted into the family of the Buddha: “Today my birth is fruitful. My human life is justified. Today I am born into the family of the Buddha. Now I am the Buddha’s child.”<sup>2</sup> I am always struck by the shift in the emotional tone during the process of this ritual, from the humility

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<sup>2</sup> *Bodhicaryāvatāra* 3.25: translated by Kate Crosby and Andrew Skilton, *The Bodhicaryāvatāra* of Śāntideva (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 22.

and fear that starts the process to sense of relief bordering on grandiosity that brings the ritual to an end.

In a general sense, these verses could be considered a form of meditation, in the sense that they are meant to bring about a change in the practitioner's sense of self and affect about the world. But meditation enters the text in a more formal way in the eighth chapter, where Śāntideva takes up the practice of mental concentration (*samādhi*), preparing the way, like Bhāviveka, for the wisdom (*prajñā*) that comes in the next chapter. At first, Śāntideva seems to develop many of the same themes that concerned Bhāviveka. The first verse speaks, for example, of avoiding distractions: "One should stabilize the mind in concentration (*samādhi*), since a person whose mind is distracted stands in the fangs of the defilements." He also sings the praises of "isolation" (*viveka*). But he saves his most intense and memorable verses for the "practice of revulsion" (*aśubha-bhāvanā*). Bhāviveka mentioned "revulsion" briefly as a way to wash away the mud of passion. Śāntideva develops it into a vivid and nightmarish meditation on the filth of the human body.

In these verses Śāntideva follows in Bhāviveka's footsteps, but the text soon takes a different turn. When the mind has been concentrated in this way, Śāntideva says, the practitioner should begin to develop the awakening mind by "meditating intently" (*bhāvayed ādarāt*) on the equality of self and other. Modern interpreters of Śāntideva have rightly focused on this meditation as the crux of the text. What does Śāntideva have in mind? The idea is to cultivate an attitude of concern for others by seeing them as an extension of oneself. In its most radical formulation it involves a meditation on "the exchange self and other" by making a deliberate effort, intellectually and emotionally, to put another person's happiness ahead of one's own. Jay Garfield expresses the complexity of this concept in his own striking description of the mind of awakening (*bodhicitta*): "*Bodhicitta* is a complex psychological phenomenon. It is a standing

motivational state with conative and affective dimensions. It centrally involves an altruistic aspiration, grounded in care, to cultivate oneself as a moral agent for the benefit of all beings.”<sup>3</sup>

What I find striking about Śāntideva’s formulation of his compassionate aspiration is the way it crosses over from meditation to analysis. The meditation itself is expressed as a form of argument. Verse 8:94, for example, takes the form of a classic three-part Indian inference, with an assertion, a reason, and an example: “I should eliminate the sufferings of others, because it is suffering, like my own; and I should also benefit others, because they are sentient beings, like myself.”<sup>4</sup> This is the same style of inference that Bhāviveka applied to the analysis of reality. In that sense it is eminently philosophical. But here, in Śāntideva’s chapter on mental concentration, it becomes an argument in service of compassion. The line between philosophy and meditation has been blurred, if it has not been obliterated altogether.

The reason for this is not difficult to understand. The subject of the next chapter, where Śāntideva treads in Bhāviveka’s footsteps and analyzes the views of his philosophical opponents, is Emptiness, the radical extension of the fundamental Buddhist concept of no-self. What could be a more helpful preparation for the exploration of Emptiness than to meditate on the moral and emotional significance of no-self. Śāntideva will have a lot to say about the intellectual understanding of Emptiness in the next chapter; here he is interested in the feeling of Emptiness-- what it feels like to be empty of self, try switching places with someone else and let the boundary between self and other disappear.

Śāntideva’s approach to selfhood here in the chapter on mental concentration gives us a more complex and nuanced understanding of the relationship between meditation and philosophy. It is not just that meditation prepares for the analysis of Emptiness; meditation also is infused by

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<sup>3</sup> Jay L. Garfield, *Engaging Buddhism: Why It Matters for Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 299.

<sup>4</sup> Verse 8.94: *mayānyaduḥkhaṃ hantavyaṃ duḥkhatvād ātma-duḥkhavat / anugrāhyā mayānye pi sattvād ātmasattvavat* //. To make the logical form of this verse more clear, it could be translated literally: The sufferings of others should be eliminated by me, because it is suffering, like my own; and others should be benefited by me, because they are sentient beings, like myself.”

the attitude of Emptiness. Bhāviveka gestured in this direction early in his chapter on seeking knowledge of reality: “[Someone who has opened the wisdom eye] practices the perfections, pure in three ways, with compassion as the motivation and omniscience as the goal, but he does not set his mind on that goal.”<sup>5</sup> Not “setting the mind” on this goal means literally that the mind does not “stand” (*sthita*) in omniscience. The same language appears in a key passage near the very beginning of the text, where Bhāviveka talks about the relationship of a bodhisattva to *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*: “[Bodhisattvas] have not stood in *saṃsāra*, because they see its faults, and they have not stood in *nirvāṇa*, because of their compassion; but they remain in *saṃsāra*, because of their promise to seek the welfare of others.”<sup>6</sup> In his commentary, Bhāviveka explains that the concept of the bodhisattva’s “no-standing” represents the bodhisattva’s *apraṭiṣṭhita-nirvāṇa*, a concept that is almost impossible to translate in English. Perhaps you can do better in Korean. We sometimes translate this as “unsupported” or “unstable” *nirvāṇa*, but the word literally means a *nirvāṇa* that does not “stand” in either *saṃsāra* or *nirvāṇa*. As Bhāviveka explains, the bodhisattva does not “apprehend” or “reify” (*upa-labh*) *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* as either different or the same. Why? Because the bodhisattva understands their Emptiness. This point comes only at the beginning of the text. Bhāviveka does not take up the formal consideration of Emptiness until much later, but it is fair to say that the understanding of Emptiness infuses the practice of a bodhisattva right from the beginning of the path.

The same is true at the beginning of Śāntideva’s account of the path. I mentioned earlier that his “Introduction” begins with a formal ritual in which the aspiring bodhisattva praises the Buddha and confesses his own inadequacy. The ritual ends with the exultant claim that the aspiring bodhisattva has been born into family of the Buddha. How is this transformation possible in the course of only a few verses? It is precisely this sense of one’s own inadequacy—or

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<sup>5</sup> Verse 3.5: *trimaṇḍalaviśuddhe hi dānādāv abhiyujyate / kāruṇyāt sarvavittvāya tatrāpy asthitamānasaḥ* //.

<sup>6</sup> Verse 1.20: *na bhava doṣadarśitvāt kṛpālutvān na nirvṛtau / sthitās tiṣṭhanti ca bhava parārthodayadīkṣitāḥ* //.

selflessness—that transforms the practitioner into an aspiring child of the Buddha. You might say that Emptiness is like an alchemical elixir that brings about this transformation. It is precisely because there is no ultimate difference between things--as there is no difference between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*--that the aspiring bodhisattva can express this transformation right from the start.

What can we say in conclusion, then, about the Madhyamaka approach to the relationship of meditation and philosophy? From one perspective, it is clear that at least two significant Indian Mādhyamikas thought that mental concentration (*samādhi*) was a natural preparation for the intellectual and discursive study of Emptiness. This mental concentration included not just mindfulness (*smṛti*) of the breath, as it did for Bhāviveka, but also more discursive practices, like the meditation on the repulsive state of the body (*aśubha-bhāvanā*). But we also have found that the contrast between meditation on one side and philosophy on the other begins to break down when we look more closely at the cognitive attitude they presuppose. This was particularly true in the case of Śāntideva, where the cultivation of compassion mirrored the intellectual realization of Emptiness, but it also was true in Bhāviveka's account of *apratīṣṭhita* or “unstable” *nirvāṇa*. We can conclude, then, that for these two representatives of the Indian tradition, meditation and philosophy are deeply intertwined. Not only does meditation prepare for the study of philosophy, but meditation is infused and animated by the values of philosophy. It is that entanglement of practice and thought that gives their view of the bodhisattva path such eloquence and such continued relevance today.

Thank you very much for your attention.