

English Dharma talk
March 4, 2017
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A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life (Bodhicaryavatara) – Class 3

By Shantideva

I thought today I'll start by explaining the practice of prostration before we go into the text by Shantideva.

Perhaps there are some new friends who are not familiar with prostrations so I'll explain how prostrations are made, what is the purpose or reason for making prostrations and the benefits of making prostrations.

Prostrations are expressions of respect. By expressing respect for others such as the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, then we try to work on our pride and cultivate humility. Sometimes we do have this sense of superiority in which we feel we are better than others or at least I'm equal to them. By expressing respect, we acknowledge others can have better qualities than us. They have attributes we lack. So we cultivate humility and work on our pride by making prostrations to objects that have excellent qualities such as representations of Buddha's body, speech, and mind.

Here at the centre before we start the class we make 2 sets of 3 prostrations. At the beginning, 3 prostrations are made to the three jewels. Then after the teacher sits down, the students make another 3 prostrations to the teacher. In the beginning, I told the students there is no need to make prostrations to me after I've sat down. But some students continue to engage in that practice. Afterwards, I reflected on the significance of making prostrations to the teacher. I thought there is no need to say the students don't have to make prostrations because they can be making it to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha or representations of the Buddha's body, speech, and mind, and they are showing respect to the Dharma that I'll teach so no reason for me to prevent students from creating virtue. This is the current practice. So that is the practice in general if any teacher comes to teach so you can think the 3 prostrations that are made are either to the teacher or to the Dharma that he or she will teach. Such a practice will be beneficial. You won't incur any loss from prostrating.

I'll explain how to make prostrations properly. There are different components in the practice of making prostrations. If you are able to have complete components then there will be greater benefit. Also when you are physically making prostrations, you should adopt a mental attitude so it becomes a complete practice.

First join your palms. There are different ways. When Indians do this, they place their palms flat and thumbs stick out. When Tibetans do it, they cup so there's an empty space in the centre and two thumbs are placed in that space.

Reason why the palms are placed in such a way is the right hand represents method. The left hand represents wisdom. So when you put your two hands together, you are actually signifying the unification of method and wisdom.

Then you touch either 3 places of your body with your palms or 4 places. There are 2 traditions. Either way of touching the body is fine.

If we follow the tradition of 3 places: You touch your Crown, then your throat, and then the heart – the centre of your chest.

So why touch Crown? Buddha has this sign called the ushnisha - this top knot on his head – this Crown protrusion. This is a very special sign that signifies the body is completely purified. Buddha has eliminated all obscurations of body. So he has a Crown protrusion. To represent our aspiration wanting to purify all our obstacles of body and wanting to obtain this ushnisha, we touch our palms to our Crown.

When we touch our palms to our throat at our neck, we are expressing this wish to obtain pure speech. Wanting to attain fully enlightened speech. In general, we have many obscurations in our speech. The Buddha has perfect speech – speech that's endowed with the 60 melodious qualities. When we touch our throat with our palms, we are expressing this wish wanting to purify all our obscurations of speech, wanting to obtain in the future the qualities. By doing such a practice, we place imprints on our mental continuum to obtain such perfect speech in the future.

Next, we place our palms at our heart – centre of our chest. This is to signify purifying our many mental obscurations. We express this wish wanting to obtain the perfect mind of an omniscient Buddha. By doing so, we are creating this potential to be able to attain a Buddha's fully enlightened mind in the future.

In terms of the tradition that touches 4 parts of the body, after touching the Crown, one would touch one's forehead precisely this point between the eyebrows. Next, go on to touch the throat and heart. Now why is it significant to touch one's forehead at this point between the eyebrows? It's because the Buddha has a special sign there called the hair curl. The Buddha has 112 signs and exemplifications of the body. Sometimes the excellent qualities of the Buddha are expressed by 32 signs and 80 exemplifying marks. So that makes a total of 112 signs and exemplifications. Among these 112 signs and exemplifications, this hair curl between the eyebrows is the most difficult to obtain. When we touch this palms at this point on our forehead, we are expressing our wish to obtain this special sign in the future.

In terms of the actual bowing down, there are 2 ways of doing this. What we call a short prostration and a long prostration. When you do a short one, you touch 5 places of your body on the ground. So there are the 2 palms on the ground, the 2 knees, and the head. When you do the long prostration, you basically need to extend your body, lie flat on the

ground before you get up. You can do either of these 2 styles of prostration. Both are correct. Your choice.

Mentally you can reflect on the following points. As you go down and your palms are pressing against the ground you should think by such an action, I'm actually subduing the sufferings and difficulties experienced by all sentient beings in all 6 realms. Think all their difficulties, problems are subdued. After that you have to briskly get up. Don't take your time. Quickly get up. Think may sentient beings be protected from suffering in the lower realms. If you can't think of all sentient beings, at least think of human beings, animals you know who are experiencing suffering, pain and so on. Think they are freed when you get up – freed from their suffering.

Usually I cite a stanza to introduce the class but today I won't because we've reached a point in the text that discusses points that are similar or relevant. So stanza 1.4

Precious human rebirth. Exaltation to take the essence of our human rebirth endowed with freedoms and privileges. Explanation of how to do that:

1.4

So hard to find such ease and wealth
Whereby to render meaningful this human birth!
If now I fail to turn it to my profit,
How could such a chance be mine again?

Here we reflect on the preciousness of human existence. We can do so by reflecting on how our existence is quite rare in relation to other life. 6 realms of sentient beings: in hell realms, hungry ghosts, gods and so on. If you have difficulty conceptualizing these beings that you can't see, then at least think of the living beings that exist on this planet earth. Look at the animals on this earth. There are animals living on the surface of earth. There are animals in the ocean. Living beings that are living in the sky and so on. At any one instant, there's an inconceivable number of animals. I don't think there's a way to say concretely how many animals there are in our planet. In comparison, human beings are very few. So in that sense, our human existence is actually very precious and rare.

Furthermore, the kind of human existence mentioned in stanza 1.4 is a special kind – it's endowed with ease and wealth. Another translation for freedoms and privileges. If human beings are rare, then humans who have the 8 freedoms and 10 privileges are even more rare.

What are the causes of taking a human existence? It's said the human rebirth is a result of having practiced ethics in some form in the past. In Buddhism there's presentation of cause and effect. For effect of human rebirth to arise, we need to cause of ethical practice. If we want more than just a human rebirth, we want a precious human rebirth, one endowed with the 8 freedoms and 10 privileges, we need to make additional causes. They are abandoning the 10 nonvirtues. You need this pure ethics of abandoned the 10 nonvirtues. On top of that, need to make stainless prayers, especially at the time of death

to take a good rebirth. One needs to also have practiced the 6 perfections; generosity and so on. When these causes are complete, then precious human rebirth takes effect. Since all these causes are difficult to do in a complete way, then we know precious human rebirth is rare.

We've discussed the 8 freedoms in a previous class. 10 privileges – in Asanga's "Hearer's Grounds".

The 5 personal privileges are:

1. Human born
2. Being born in a central land where the Buddha's teaching is flourishing – if one is born in a kind of place where the Buddha's teachings are unheard of, then one's deprived of the opportunity to practice
3. Complete powers – sense faculties – one can see, hear, think etc.
4. Not having erred in extreme actions – the actions of immediate retribution – these are very negative actions – e.g. kill one's own mother, father and so on. One hasn't done these extreme actions nor has one caused others to do them. If one's done any of these, it would be hard to generate new excellent qualities.
5. Faith in the sources – faith in the 3 scriptural baskets of the Buddha – Tripitaka. If one doesn't have confidence in these teachings, then one won't engage in hearing them and contemplating them and so on. So faith in this is a personal privilege.

We have gone through the privileges with oneself.

Now we discuss 5 privileges based on others. Although one may have 5 personal privileges, if there are conditions lacking in the external environment based on others, then one won't have the most conducive conditions to practice Dharma. The same text says (paraphrased)

6. The Buddha has come
7. to teach the excellent Dharma
8. and teachings remain.
9. And people subsequently engage in them
10. Others have kindness in their hearts

The Buddha has come. Else, no way.

Not only did he come, but he taught. It's possible he comes but doesn't teach.

And then teachings remain.

The fourth – people subsequently engage in Buddha's teachings. Not sufficient that teachings remain. People actively engage them to keep them alive. That is a conducive condition for us to engage.

On top of that, people have kindness in their hearts. The people involved in Dharma are kind. E.g. we need people to explain the Dharma to us. If there is no one who's kind

enough to do that, the teachers don't care about us, then we won't have access to the Dharma. The 5th privilege is others have kindness in their hearts.

We explained 8 freedoms before. Today, 10 privileges. All of us are very fortunate. b/c everyone in this class not only has human existence. Each and every one of us has a special human existence. One that's complete in these 18 good qualities.

So what – we have a precious human birth? 7 billion people – not all have.

Now we have it, what should we do?

1.4

Whereby to render meaningful this human birth!

If now I fail to turn it to my profit,

How could such a chance be mine again?

It's said this human existence we've found is so hard to find. We need to think about this carefully. I've found something so rare. If I don't use it properly, I won't be able to find it easily in the future.

b/c with this precious human rebirth, we can create so much good. We can create the causes of existence in the future that is better and better. This means with this precious human rebirth, we can make progress on the spiritual path on the way to enlightenment. We need to seize this precious opportunity. b/c if we fail to turn it to my profit, then it's very hard to find such a precious opportunity in the future. We should analyze how to make good use of this precious opportunity.

Why do we say it'll be difficult to find it again? The causes for human existence aren't so easy to create. To get just a mere human existence, we need to practice some form of ethics. If we want a precious human rebirth that's endowed with 8 freedoms and 10 privileges, then we need to create even more causes – we need to practice pure ethics – abandon all 10 nonvirtues – make stainless prayers – practice generosity, ethics and so on. If you look around you honestly you see not many people can create those causes. So based on that, we can see if we don't seize this precious opportunity now, it'll be hard for us to find it in the future.

Outline:

Explaining the way to take the essence of the precious human rebirth

Then 2 parts:

General presentation

Explanation of individual topics

The general presentation explains the structure of this text. There are 10 chapters in this text. The general presentation explains what are covered in these 10 chapters.

The first chapter – excellence of bodhicitta. The benefits / excellent qualities of bodhicitta are explained. This is important in the beginning b/c if we understand it's something wonderful, then we'll generate enthusiasm to engage in this practice. Want to produce it in our mental continuum. First, the excellence of bodhicitta are explained so we can generate enthusiasm for wanting to generate it.

e.g. let's say there's a place where no fruits are produced. Some people come along and tell the villages you can actually plant apple trees in your area. These apple trees will grow well if you take care of them this way and that way. They are good for you. In order to get people interested in planting apple trees, first the benefits of apples have to be explained to them. The people have to be made to understand apples are really delicious and good for your health – an apple a day keeps the doctor away – and people become enthusiastic. They want to learn how to grow the apple trees properly. So like that, you learn excellent qualities, generate enthusiasm and want to practice.

So after having understood the excellent qualities of the mind of enlightenment, then you generate enthusiasm. But it's not so easy to generate. You need the various conditions ready before it can be produced in your mind. You need to purify your negativities and to accumulate the collections of wisdom, merit and so on. This is like you wanting to invite a very precious guest to your house. Like the President, Prime Minister. You need to prepare the place before you invite the precious guest. You want to start by cleaning the place. You want to throw them out – prepared nicely and so on before you invite this important person. Similarly, bodhicitta – you need to prepare your mind before you generate it. You do it by purifying negativities and accumulating merit and so on.

Second chapter: practice of confession. You confess your obscurations. You purify your negativities.

Third chapter: commitment – explains how you accumulate the collections of merit and so on, so you have favourable conditions for bodhicitta to be generated.

In these 2 chapters, you are taught how to purify negativities and accumulate merit and so on.

Chapter 4: taught how to rely on conscientiousness. b/c if you create virtue but you're not conscientious, there's danger those virtues you create deteriorate. In order to prevent that, you need to practice conscientiousness. So the title of chapter 4 is awareness.

Then 5 chapters teaching 5 of the 6 perfections.

Chapter 5: vigilance. The way to practice ethics (second of 6 perfections). How to guard mindfulness and vigilance.

Chapter 6: practice of patience is taught.

Chapter 7: the next perfection – joyous effort – heroic perseverance.

Chapter 8: perfection of concentration. chapter entitled “meditation”.

Chapter 9: wisdom.

So we’ve covered the 2nd – 6th of the perfections in chapters 5-9. How about generosity?
In chapter 10: on dedication. This way, we have some understanding of the structure of the 10 chapters.

Now the next big section – individual topics.

Now outlines.

Explanation of individual topics – 2 parts

Contemplating the benefits of cultivating the mind of enlightenment

Having generated the 2 minds of enlightenment, the way to train in the Bodhisattva deeds

The first of these - Contemplating the benefits of cultivating the mind of enlightenment- 2 subsections

Explanation of the text of the chapter

Indicating the title of the chapter

The first of these - Explanation of the text of the chapter – 2 parts

Advice on the appropriateness of abandoning negativities and accomplishing virtues

Contemplating extensively the benefits of the mind of enlightenment

Advice on the appropriateness of abandoning negativities and accomplishing virtues

5 lines in the root text

Stanza 1.5 and the first line of stanza 1.6

1.5

As when a flash of lightning rends the night,
And in its glare shows all that the dark black clouds had hidden,
Likewise rarely, through the buddha’s power,
Virtuous thoughts rise, brief and transient, in the world.

1.6

Thus behold the utter frailty of goodness!

These lines say how flash of lightning can light up the night in an instant. The sky is filled with clouds. Then just for an instant, there is a flash of lightning. For a short period of time, the sky is illuminated. Then it vanishes. The sky is dark again. This illustrates the nature of our human existence. And our mind that turns toward virtue. So our human existence is very rare. One with freedoms and privileges is rarer. So due to the coming of the Buddha, the power of the Buddhas, then we are able to generate virtuous thoughts. In our existence since beginningless time, we've taken many rebirths. But among those, very few human rebirths. So lightning in the sky. Likewise, our human existence comes and goes very quickly. So the mind that thinks – create virtue – very rare.

It's said goodness is very frail. Is this really the case? With people like us. Let's examine our existence. In our lives how much virtue do we create? How much nonvirtue do we create? Specifically let's examine just a single day. How much virtue do you create in a day versus nonvirtue you create? Today we have class. Let's say you're very focused and are able to concentrate well. Let's say you create 2 hours of virtue. But it's a day when you don't come to the Temple- normal working day. How much good quality virtue are you creating- good motivation and execution and everything? Maybe not so much – maybe some minutes in 24 hours. Here it's mentioned the virtue we create is quite frail.

In our human life you can see virtue is really not our forte. It's not so dominant in our life. Probably we will find many instances of nonvirtue. If you check the 10 nonvirtues, you know, killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, intoxicants, coveting, gossip, speaking harsh speech, speaking divisive speech, wrong views – we probably commit a lot. So it's hard to get a human existence. For good result, need to create strong causes. If we're not good at creating those causes, then the chances of precious human rebirth aren't very high. There's this remark about the feebleness of our virtue in 1.6.

Next big section is contemplating extensively the benefits of cultivating the mind of enlightenment – many subsections

We'll discuss the ones that pertain to the root text itself

This section we see now is – destroying great negativities – what this means – we've mentioned how our virtue is feeble but our nonvirtues powerful, so does this mean there's reason for us to lose hope and think the situation is really bad because I have very little virtue and a lot of negativities and so there's no way for me to make any real progress on the spiritual path. The answer to that qualm is no. It's possible for you to destroy great negativities although you've created many of these in the past. If the right causes and conditions come, you can overcome all these great negativities you've committed in the past.

1.6 – last 3 lines explain how great negativities can be destroyed

Except for perfect bodhicitta,
There is nothing able to withstand
The great and overwhelming strength of evil.

We have accumulated many forms of negativities over our infinite life times. In these many life times, we have done things that are unskillful. As a result, we have a huge store of negativities. If the way to purify them is to apply an antidote one by one to purify each negativity then there will be no end. b/c since beginningless time, so many negativities. But we have one way to wipe it out – that practice is bodhicitta. With Bodhicitta, one can wipe out all negativities. This kind of practice is more powerful than verbally reciting prayers, physically prostrating and so on.

In the next stanza, 1.7, we will see additional qualities of this mind of enlightenment. b/c 1.6 mentions Bodhicitta has the ability to withstand the strength of evil – overcome past mistakes we've made. One may wonder: does it have the power to accomplish anything else? Yes.

The ability to accomplish supreme virtue is explained. It can bring about all forms of positive accomplishments. It's the supreme virtue.

1.7

The mighty buddhas, pondering for many ages,
Have seen that this, and only this, will save
The boundless multitudes,
And bring them easily to supreme joy.

The Buddhas of the past have practiced the mind of enlightenment, so first they generated this mind of enlightenment and then caused that mind of enlightenment to be increased and strengthened further. They understand this mind is the best practice. It's the most powerful virtue that can bring about all forms of happiness and wellbeing. Bodhisattvas who are practicing to become Buddhas see this is the best method. In this way, these spiritually developed beings see this mind of enlightenment and only this can bring about the greatest benefit for all living beings.

Question 1 (from young boy) – the 3 animals on the wheel of life – why did they pick pig for ignorance, snake for anger and rooster for attachment?

Answer 1:

First, why is the pig used to represent ignorance? When the owner gives food to the pig, the pig thinks my owner is being so nice. He's very kind. When in fact the owner is thinking, I can fatten it up and kill it and eat it. So the pig is totally ignorant of this brutal reality. He's blissfully ignorant eating the food and thinking the owner is feeding him out of kindness.

Second, snake in general is very aggressive. It's fierce and easily be provoked. For that reason, the snake is used to represent anger or hatred.

Third, rooster has very strong desire. Sexual copulation – very strong lust. So the rooster is used to represent desire or attachment.

Attachment and anger originate from ignorance. From ignorance we have attachment and anger. For that reason, we have in this drawing, the rooster and snake emerging from the mouth of the pig.

Question 2: Would Geshela please teach more about the significance of the Arya Sanghata Sutra? b/c Lama Zopa Rinpoche said on FPMT that that was the sutra he ensured was recited many times on the anniversary of 9/11 to prevent future attacks and after the December 2014 tsunami.

<https://www.lamayeshe.com/article/arya-sanghata-sutra>

<http://fpmt.org/education/teachings/sutras/sanghata-sutra-in-various-languages>

answer

The Sutra is quite long. Around 200 pages. It would be difficult for people who don't have much time to find time to recite the sutra from beginning to end in a single session. However, if you can afford the time, you can do it on your own. If you would like to recite the sutra, and don't have a continuous session, you can break it up and recite bit by bit.

Last year, there was some disaster – earthquake in Taiwan and His Holiness advised the Buddhists to advise the Heart Sutra. So that is another possibility for the recitation of sutra in order to help avert disasters and to assist victims and so on. So if you find time and the conditions come together, you can recite the sutra. The Heart Sutra is probably more manageable b/c it's shorter. Doing such a practice is beneficial.

If you find time, you can always recite the Heart Sutra mantra – that's a short mantra that encompasses the entire spiritual path.

Question 3: 2 newcomers from University. Might be helpful for them to give a brief explanation of bodhicitta and its role in Buddhist practice. What is it and what's its role in Buddhist practice?

Answer

What is bodhicitta? Mind of enlightenment. The text we are studying will go into detail regarding what it is. But let me give you a brief idea. Bodhicitta is a mind that is endowed with 2 aspirations: must have these 2 attributes: 1st, is the aspiration wanting to place all living beings in happiness. Has this wish wanting all living beings to experience

every happiness. Second aspiration comes about through reflecting on how the first aspiration can be actualized. If I want all living beings to experience every form of happiness, if I give them food, will I be able to achieve that? Probably not. In Buddhism, we say the way to really benefit all living beings is to lead them on the spiritual path so they can attain the highest form of enlightenment. For that to happen, I need to understand how to help them. I need to understand their dispositions, mentalities etc. To have such an ability to help all sentient beings in the best way, I need to achieve enlightenment first. b/c then I'll know what is the best way to help each and every living being. So bodhicitta – the mind of enlightenment – has these 2 aspirations. Wanting to place all living beings in the place of highest happiness. The aspiration to attain highest full enlightenment so one can help others attain that.

What role does Bodhicitta play in the Buddhist path? One function is it clears the mind of negativities. One can purify the mind of obscurations. When we talk about obscurations, there are many forms. By harming living beings, one creates negativities or disrespecting beings who have excellent qualities – holy beings, the Buddhas and so on, one creates negativities.

There are these 2 main forms of negativities. Ones created in relation to living beings. And those created in relation to holy beings. When we generate bodhicitta that's endowed with the 2 aspirations, then those 2 aspirations can counteract the two types of negativities. By generating thought to place all beings in happiness, we counteract first. By second aspiration – generating it – we are generating a mind of confidence, conviction in the state of the Buddhas, enlightened beings. That counteracts negativities created when we disrespected the holy beings in the past.

By generating faith in enlightened beings, then we purify negativities created with respect to them.

Let me give an example to clarify.

Let me tell you this little story. I have a friend who's also a Geshe. What happened was he was going to school. He had to pass through this place that was very crowded. Someone had probably stepped on another's foot. Then that person got really angry. Very furious. The person who had caused this pain was very apologetic. He was smiling and saying I'm sorry, I'm very sorry in a sincere way. As a result, the victim then stopped being angry. He was very unhappy and b/c of sincere apology, his anger dissipated. What I'm trying to illustrate is – when a negativity is created in relation to a person, and you want to dissipate that negativity, you have to create counteraction with respect to that same person. If you hurt someone, you sincerely regret having hurt them. You apologize. That action will cause the previous hurt to be purified.

Question 4 from young boy: Why does Chenrezig have 1000 arms?

He wants to help as many people as possible. Usually, helping hands is better. So he is depicted in that way – symbolic meaning. He's a manifestation of the Buddha helping many many beings – so more hands, more help for living beings.

Let's say 1000 people fall into the water. They're in danger of drowning. 1 hand – pull out 1 person. But what about others? If want to help all of them at the same time, need 1000 hands to pull them out at one time. The 1000 hands symbolize Chenrezig's intention to help all beings. If he has limited power, then what that means is someone will get help but others don't. to represent this ability wanting to help all beings, he's depicted with many hands.

He also has 1000 eyes – in each palm of his hand, there's an eye, so he also has 1000 eyes. Then he can see what's happening everywhere and with everyone so he can see who needs help.