

English Dharma talk
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A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life (Bodhicaryavatara) – Class 7

By Shantideva

So for today, I will not cite stanza to introduce the class. Rather, I will discuss the Four Seals of the Buddha's teachings. This can come up in question and answer and I thought it would be beneficial to give an explanation of what they are.

They are the essence or summary of the Buddha's teachings.

The first seal is: all compounded phenomena are impermanent.

Compounded phenomena are the result of the coming together of many conditions. They are phenomena that are compounded by various conditions. As a result of that, they are able to perform certain functions. In the first seal, the Buddha taught all such compounded phenomena are impermanent.

By impermanent we mean instability. All compounded phenomena have an unstable nature, because they are the product of cause and conditions. So they are subject to transformation. It's not the case they can stay unchanged. They are subject to transformation according to causes and conditions.

To give an example, let's consider suffering. Suffering is a compounded phenomena. What this means is it's affected by causes and conditions. Sometimes suffering exists, sometimes it doesn't exist. So it's a phenomena contingent on causes and conditions. When causes and conditions arise, it arises. When other causes and conditions arise, suffering can disappear.

Second seal: all contaminated phenomena are suffering. We do have certain experience of suffering. What is being stated here in the second seal is any kind of phenomenon that's contaminated is in the nature of suffering. There is no exception. If something is contaminated, it has the nature of suffering.

This second seal is a way for us to identify accurately what is suffering. Because when we fail to identify suffering as suffering, we can enter into a lot of confusion. When we don't understand a certain object has a nature of suffering, that the foundation of the phenomena is contaminated, then when we use this object, we run into trouble. We run into problems and we become frustrated because we fail to understand its nature. We identify this nature mistakenly. So the fact that we end up in this kind of frustration is a sign that we fail to understand what suffering is. We fail to identify suffering as suffering.

Let me give you an example. We like to perhaps shop in the mall to buy clothes. We may see a piece of clothing that is very beautiful to the eyes. The style is beautiful; the material is beautiful. If I buy it and wear it, I'll be so happy. If you do it, and buy it, and wear it, you may feel this is great. This is making me so happy. But what happens in reality is you may be so attached to this piece of clothing that you'll be afraid of dirtying it. So if you are sitting on the chair, you need to ensure is this chair clean? Worried about damaging it. If you go somewhere, you may be afraid of dirtying the clothes and so on. We had thought it would give us happiness, but the result is it gives us suffering. We have these additional worries and stress that we didn't have before.

Third seal: all phenomena are empty and selfless. This means the circumstances that we face in our lives are something subject to change. E.g. if we have problems, we shouldn't think that these problems are going to last forever. Don't think I'll never be free from my troubles b/c problems are empty and selfless. They do not have any intrinsic existence. They do not exist by their own side. They arise by depending on causes and conditions. This means when there are appropriate causes and conditions, these problems will go away. b/c if things were to exist intrinsically, from their own side, then this means they'll never go away, b/c they have this inherent, independent nature. But this is not the case: all phenomena are empty and selfless. Our problems can transform and go away.

Third seal helps us understand fourth seal. We said third seal: phenomena don't exist by their own side. When causes and conditions change, the result will also change. Causes and conditions can change so problems can completely come to an end. That kind of state is called nirvana: liberation. This state where there is complete cessation of suffering. Complete stoppage of disturbances. Therefore, the fourth seal says nirvana is peace.

Root text:

Stanza 20

The four seals of Buddhism I described earlier are a way to introduce the Buddha's teachings to people who are interested in, who are followers. It condenses the Buddha's teachings into four statements.

These four seals can be explained in a very extensive way.

We are in this section where the benefits of bodhicitta are being explained. Before, we explained its benefits. Now we want to know why it occurs.

2 subsections: proof by citing scripture; proof by applying reasoning

20:

This the Tathagata,
In the sutra Subahu requested,

Said with reasoned demonstration,
Teaching those inclined to lesser paths.

This stanza (20) explains the proof (scriptural) for why wishing bodhicitta would have so many benefits. We mentioned early on two types: bodhicitta in intention (aspiring) and active (practical engagement). The wishing bodhicitta or aspiring bodhicitta has many benefits. How do we know that? The Buddha taught it in the sutra. In this sutra that Subahu requested, the Buddha taught it to those inclined to lesser paths. There are certain practitioners who are inclined to self-liberation vehicle. In order to encourage them to turn the mind to the Universal Vehicle, the Buddha taught the benefits of bodhicitta.

Who are these beings who are inclined to lesser paths? E.g. there are certain practitioners who enter the Mahayana, wanting to obtain Buddhahood for the benefit of all living beings. But they are exposed to the Bodhisattva practices of generosity, ethics, and so on for all living beings, they feel intimidated. They get this sense it's too much for me; beyond me. They want to give it up and only work for own liberation. So they fall to the Hinayana / individual liberation vehicle.

These beings who are inclined to the lesser path are not those who are definite in that path. There are certain practitioners who are definite in the Hinayana lineage, in that they have no inclination towards the Mahayana at all at that point of their spiritual development. Here, we are not talking about those types of beings. Rather, we are talking about those who are indefinite: they can possibly enter Hinayana / Mahayana. For those beings who can enter the Mahayana, but who are inclined toward the Hinayana, the Buddha taught there are these benefits of bodhicitta. Even though you can't practice all deeds of Bodhisattvas, you can hold this bodhicitta in your mind. Even one instance of bodhicitta can bring about vast benefits. As we've seen earlier on. So Buddha encouraged them to generate this mind of enlightenment.

Let's move to proof by reasoning. Why are there so many benefits of bodhicitta? This has several parts. The proof related to benefits obtained from the engaging mind. From the aspiring mind.

First, aspiring mind:

Subsection: The great benefits on accounts of the infinite functions of accomplishing virtue: expressed by stanzas 21 and 22.

21

If with kindly generosity
One merely has the wish to sooth
The aching heads of other beings,
Such merit knows no bounds.

22

No need to speak, then, of the wish
To drive away the endless pain
Of each and every living being,
Bringing them unbounded virtues.

What is this mention of aching heads of other beings? This is related to a story of daughter of someone called Mitra.

This person was born in the hell realm. At one point, this person had a terrible pain in the head. This is actually a man. But the story is called daughter of Mitra. He generated this wish: may all sentient beings' headaches ripen on me. May all their headaches be dispelled. His thought was quite limited: only about soothing headaches. But even then, he created so much merit.

The point in 21 and 22: if one wishes to dispel the headaches of all living beings, one would create boundless merit. There's no need to speak, then of the merit one can create by wishing all sentient beings be free from suffering and wanting to make that happen. Not just headaches suffering, but suffering of every kind. So the latter wish, encapsulated by bodhicitta, will bring unbounded virtues.

The next section explains there is no altruistic mind that's superior to bodhicitta. Explained in 23.

Could our fathers or our mothers
Ever have so generous a wish?
Do the very gods, the rishis, even Brahma
Harbor such benevolence as this?

This mind of bodhicitta wishes to dispel the suffering of all sentient beings, not just one type of suffering, but every type of suffering. Here, we are asking, is there an altruistic mind that's superior to this mind of enlightenment wishing to dispel suffering of each living being in every way? E.g. do fathers and mothers have such a wish? Generally, fathers and mothers have very strong minds to want to benefit their children, relatives, family and so on. But they would not have this wish, wanting to benefit all living beings by dispelling each and every type of suffering. Even the gods and sages. Rishi means sage. There are these sages who say / pronounce words of truth in order to accomplish goals to benefit others and so on. But they lack this wish. Even Brahma doesn't have this wish. So bodhicitta is very exceptional. There's no goodheartedness that's superior to it.

Not only do beings such as mothers and fathers not have this altruistic mind. Even oneself we ourselves do not have such a mind for ourselves. This is the next outline.

Such an altruistic mind is not generated in sentient beings even for their own welfare.

For in the past they never,
Even in their dreams, conceived
Such profit even for themselves.
How could they have such aims for others' sake?

What this means is these beings mentioned earlier in 23 (fathers, mothers, gods, sages, Brahma) they do not even conceive of such an altruistic mind for their own welfare in their dreams. So how is it possible they have such a thought for others' welfare? So this is not possible. In other words they have not generated such a mind.

The next section summarizes and praises this mind of bodhicitta.

25

For beings do not wish their own true good,
So how could they intend such good for others' sake?
This state of mind so precious and so rare
Arises truly wondrous, never seen before.

This mind of bodhicitta is really amazing, because usually such a mind of wanting to benefit others doesn't even arise for one's own welfare. So this mind that wants to benefit others for others' welfare is only found in bodhisattvas, who want to end others' suffering by obtaining enlightenment. So this mind is wondrous. So what's being said is this mind is so wonderful. We should try to make effort to generate this mind. If we've already generated it, we don't want it to deteriorate. What's more, we want it to increase stronger and stronger.

The next stanza (26) explains the proof that there will be benefits from the engaging mind / practical mind.

The pain-dispelling draft,
This cause of joy for those who wander through the world –
This precious attitude, this jewel of mind,
How shall it be gauged or quantified?

So here we are talking about the benefits of the engaging mind. This is said to be cause of joy for those who wander the world. Why is this the cause of joy? It causes the attainment of good rebirths. Not only that but it also leads to liberation from samsara. even the good rebirths from samsara. This mind of enlightenment causes sentient beings to leave samsara. Such a mind conjoined with Bodhisattva's deeds will bring about even more benefits than the wishing mind. The wishing mind above brings about boundless benefits. Now the benefits are even more. Conjoined with activity, practicing the various Bodhisattva deeds. This mind is a pain-dispelling draft. It's like a medicinal drink that gets rid of sentient beings' sufferings and causes them to have good rebirths.

In the second half of stanza 26, the text reads:

This precious attitude, this jewel of mind,
How shall it be gauged or quantified?

This means the benefits of the engaging bodhicitta is so extensive that it's not possible for us to measure. To explain this point, there is a sutra citation.

This sutra is the sutra requested by Viradatta. If the merits of the mind of enlightenment were to take form, it would fill the entire realm of space and exceed it.

Why it's correct that such benefits can arise:

27

For if the simple thought to be of help to others
Exceeds in worth the worship of the buddhas,
What need is there to speak of actual deeds
That bring about the weal and benefit of beings?

It's said just the simple wish wanting to help others, obtain enlightenment, exceeds the merit obtained from worshipping the Buddhas. What need is there then to speak of engaging in bodhicitta?

This point is taught in King of meditative stabilization sutra. If one generates this wish to benefit all sentient beings by becoming a Buddha, this thought will create more merit than that from worshipping many Buddhas as there are billions of Buddha fields. If that is the case, then what's the need to mention the infinite merit if one were to engage in practical bodhicitta? Practical bodhicitta means one isn't just thinking of doing something; they're actually doing it. They're making preparations and going on the journey (rather than thinking of going). If one practices engaging bodhicitta (conjoins mind of enlightenment with practice of Bodhisattva deeds for all living beings), then of course, infinite merit is created.

28 is very important because it addresses a doubt that can arise with respect to the benefit of bodhicitta:

For beings long to free themselves from misery,
But misery itself they follow and pursue.
They long for joy, but in their ignorance
Destroy it, as they would a hated enemy.

I myself am quite moved by this stanza. It has a deep impression on me. While we were in monasteries, we did not study this text. This wasn't a part of our Geshe studies. We didn't get to read it when in the monastery. But after I finished the Geshe studies, and was invited to Taiwan, and had the chance to teach this text, when I saw this stanza, it had such a great impact on me. If you can read this stanza carefully, listen to the explanations, and reflect on the meaning, that would be very wonderful.

In this stanza, 28, the first half says although wishing to become free from suffering, sentient beings follow and pursue suffering. This means even though sentient beings don't want any misery at all, out of ignorance, they run towards suffering itself. They run after suffering with such a strong purpose, with such a strong intention, thinking it would bring them happiness.

For example, there is a person who has problems with eyesight. This person thinks I'm going to go for a walk. I'm going to enjoy myself. But because their eyesight is so poor, he doesn't notice he's walking towards a cliff. Eventually, he falls off the cliff. What this means is even though he wants happiness, because he's not able to see where this happiness comes from, he ends up suffering. We are like that. We want happiness. But we are not able to identify the sources of happiness. As a result, we create the causes of suffering. We obtain suffering instead of the happiness we desire.

We don't usually think in a spontaneous way: may all living beings may be happy. Usually we think: may I be happy. Without realizing this self-centred thought is the cause of unhappiness.

Another e.g. let's say a city or town with a 100,000 people. You know: if the people in this town are such that they have various problems. E.g. they cannot find food. They cannot find drink and so on. If you alone wish to be free from this problem of not finding food and water and so on. It would be very difficult b/c everyone else is suffering from shortage of food and drink.

The reason is by oneself alone, it's not possible to achieve that goal of happiness of finding food, drink and so on.

e.g. if you one person need a place to stay. You need a house. And you are all alone. How are you going to achieve that goal? Let's say you are in a forest. There's some form of empty plain. How will you accomplish your goal?

Imagine you're in this situation where you're all alone. You want to build a place where you can stay. Even if you had all the skills to build a house, you need tools. Where get tools? Made in factory. People need to work there to make tools. Let's say you can access tools. But need money. Where get money? Rely on others to give you money. Without relying on others, you can't print money at home and use that to pay for the tools. So you can see you really rely on others.

The thought: may I find happiness can actually lead to the opposite result. If one is completely obsessed with one's own wellbeing, then it's quite easy for one to create unskillful actions in the process of trying to achieve that goal. E.g. one may not lie intentionally or steal intentionally, but unskillful actions arise because one's so obsessed with one's wellbeing, leading to exploiting others and other negative actions. The result is one will suffer and run into problems. This is what this stanza says. Although we want to be free from suffering, we run into suffering.

So this stanza actually eliminates this kind of doubt that wonders: if I just wish others' happiness, then will I not be sacrificing my own happiness? By wanting to benefit others, by being concerned about others' welfare, then you will achieve happiness. b/c the mind of enlightenment is this ultimate altruistic mind. b/c you're not just wishing for your own happiness. You're wishing that all sentient beings have happiness. You're reflecting on the fact that others more than me (so many other people) are more important than me. Just that very thought expands your mind: gives space to your mind. The consequence is your mind will not fall into negativity easily. So that itself is a huge benefit; huge profit to be gained from bodhicitta.

Sometimes I'm afraid what I say will irritate you, b/c Westerners have a certain mentality that is not sometimes not equal to Easterners. But generally, the students are very receptive to what I say.

Here, we have this kind of advice regarding wanting to benefit others and make relations with others and so on. But sometimes in Western society, there is this emphasis on being independent, and be self-reliant and do things on your own without relying on others and so on. Having become accustomed to what is advocated in Buddhism, wanting to benefit all living beings, being connected to all living beings; if someone who becomes used to this idea and becomes the prime minister of a country, this person would want to connect with other countries and be friendly.

Sometimes the education seems to be teaching us how to be independent, not rely on others and so on. But at the end, one realizes the importance of cooperating with others. Various countries trade, do commerce, I buy your things, you buy my things. There is this collaboration for example to fight terrorism in the world or whatever. What we do with spiritual practice is similar. We start with self-concern. We are really obsessed with our own wellbeing. We're not so concerned with others' wellbeing. What we need to do in practice is generate concern for others and want to help them and benefit them.

In the second half of the stanza, it says sentient beings want joy but in ignorance, destroy it like a hated enemy.

Reality is we rely on others to achieve our goals. In our ignorance, we think others are obstacles to our achievement of happiness. Therefore, we destroy the causes of happiness, thinking they are like a hated enemy. Even though we want joy, we destroy the sources of happiness.

If one is wondering: how do I achieve happiness for all living beings? How do I help them to be free from suffering and achieve happiness? One will analyze and understand it's due to ignorance that sentient beings are suffering. Although they want to be free from suffering, out of ignorance, they run toward suffering. They want happiness, but in their ignorance, they destroy happiness. Bodhicitta says: I want to free sentient beings from suffering. In order to do that, I need to teach them how to counteract ignorance. In order to teach them effectively, I need to understand their mentalities. I need to know

how to teach them in the best way. I need to be able to bring the points across to them in an effective manner. I need to dispel not only suffering, but also their causes.

In order to achieve these goals of benefiting sentient beings and so they are free from suffering, I need to be fully enlightened. b/c if I don't obtain full enlightenment, I'll be severely limited in my ability to reach out to sentient beings. If I study all that the Buddha taught, understand the meaning and try to teach others, is this sufficient? How I say may not be fitting to others' minds. They may have specific dispositions / mentalities. So my explanations simply fall on deaf ears. If they ask me a question, how will I answer it in the most skillful manner? If I don't become fully enlightened, I'm really quite limited in ability to help them. In terms of physical assistance, if I want to help them be free from suffering, I'll run into many obstacles. So if I want to be of ultimate benefit to other beings, I need to become a Buddha. In Maitreya's Ornament of Clear Realization, it's mentioned to take care of all living beings, I need to know all the paths available. I need to understand the faculties, dispositions, and mentalities of all living beings and teach them accordingly.

Answering questions is not so easy. Perhaps you are very knowledgeable and you know everything under the sky. But when someone asks you a question, you need to give an answer that's appropriate to the listener. If you're not experienced, and you tell them everything you know, they may not understand what you are saying. So their questions don't get answered. You may give some answer, but b/c of this person's peculiar mentality, the answer you give may actually harm the person's mind. So instead of benefiting the person, you harm the person. b/c we fail to understand where they are coming from and their background. When the Buddha was alive, he was asked 14 questions by non-Buddhists. He kept quiet because he was able to see, if he were to give an answer, that answer would cause harm to the non-Buddhists so the Buddha kept quiet and did not answer the questions.

Question from young child: What are the five heinous crimes? The actions of immediate retribution.

Answer:

These major crimes are:

1. Killing one's father
2. Killing one's mother
3. Killing a Foe-Destroyer or Arhat
4. Drawing blood from the Buddha
5. Causing a schism in the Sangha

Schism: you cause the Sangha, Buddha's followers, to break into two disharmonious groups.

Question: the goal is to reach enlightenment. So what happens when that actually happens? Does samsara stop existing? All the realms no more? Or is it even possible for all sentient beings to do that?

Answer: is it possible for all sentient beings to obtain enlightenment? Yes. but if you ask when: it's not possible to answer that question.

If you ask: from when you were small to now, did any sentient being obtain enlightenment? But how many? Then I again I don't have an answer.

We say there will be a day when samsara becomes empty. But if you ask when, no answer.

Question: is renunciation essential first step of generating active bodhicitta?

Answer: it is necessary to first train in renunciation, but I would not say it's necessary to generate uncontrived renunciation before you generate uncontrived bodhicitta.

Before you can generate bodhicitta, you must train in renunciation. Why? b/c it involves thinking all sentient beings are tormented by suffering and so I want to save them from suffering. This happens first by you understanding your own suffering. How you're subject to own suffering. You want to be free from those sufferings yourself. Once you come to a genuine understanding of wanting to be free from suffering, then you generate wish that others are free from suffering. You also want them to be free from suffering. So what this means is when you generate uncontrived bodhicitta, simultaneously you generate uncontrived renunciation. So uncontrived renunciation doesn't precede uncontrived bodhicitta. But you must train in renunciation first.

Maybe I can clarify a question in discussion group: what happens to Hinayana Foe-destroyer when he dies?

Different philosophical systems / tenet systems have different ways of answering that.

Baibhashika (School of Great Exposition): A Hinayana tenet says when an Arhat attains nirvana, then this Arhat will not take rebirth again, because in that tenet system, they advocate three final vehicles. An Arhat obtains nirvana and that's it. That's a final vehicle. The Arhat will not take rebirth again.

This is related to the discussion you had previously. The point is here, there are different philosophical views regarding what happens to an Arhat after he obtains nirvana. This has to do with the views. It does not mean there is necessarily an Arhat has to proceed in a particular manner. Different schools have different views.

What is being taught here in our system is when someone attains Hinayana Arhatship, eventually that person will be encouraged by Buddhas to generate bodhicitta and go on to

obtain full enlightenment. In our system, it's not said someone attains Hinayan nirvana and that's all. This person still can go on to enter Mahayana and obtain Buddhahood.