

English Dharma talk
May 6, 2017
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A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life (Bodhicaryavatara) – Class 11

By Shantideva

In a sutra of the Buddha, he said that sentient beings due to not understanding the reality of emptiness wander in cyclic existence. What this means is living beings can't understand that there's no inherently existing self, there's no self that exists from its own side, that exists by its own character. As a result of grasping to the non-existent self, as well as existing to mine, living beings generate afflictions, disturbing emotions and due to those afflictive emotions, sentient beings are trapped in cyclic existence.

We face various kinds of problems and challenges. And the best method to remove all our difficulties and problems is to realize reality as it is. If we are able to understand phenomena as they really exist, then we'll be able to rid all undesirable experiences. For this reason, the Buddha taught the Dharma.

So the solution proposed by the Buddha is to understand emptiness, understand reality. So the Buddha gave teachings explaining what emptiness is and how to realize it. However, just working on understanding emptiness is not sufficient because we also need to have the support of merit. So in other words, we need to collect positive energy. It is only through a combination of wisdom and merit that we can obtain full enlightenment. In order to accumulate merit, we engage in practices such as making prostrations, reciting mantras, and doing different kinds of preliminary practice such as going for refuge and so on. These practices in this text by Shantideva – on top of meditating on emptiness – we also need to create favourable conditions for enlightenment to arise. It's not that easy to obtain full enlightenment.

At the beginning of this section, we mentioned that it's necessary to engage in certain preparations before we can generate the precious mind of Bodhicitta. This is like if you want to invite say the Prime Minister to a certain place, you have to make sure that this location is well prepared in the sense that the venue is clean, seats have to be prepared, and food and drink and other kinds of refreshments have to be properly prepared. So similarly, when we want to invite this precious valuable mind of enlightenment, we want to prepare our mind so that bodhicitta can arise. This mind of bodhicitta is something very powerful and precious. It can eliminate all misery and problems. If our mental continuum is such that it's filled with negative emotions, attachment, anger, ignorance and so on, then these afflictions will hinder the generation of bodhicitta. For that reason, we need to accumulate merit, purify, confess negativities and so on, so that we can prepare the mind such that the mind of enlightenment can arise eventually in our mental continuum.

This explanation I gave above should not be accepted simply based on scriptural authority. b/c it's something you can prove using logic. If you want to generate the mind of enlightenment, mind rooted in compassion, then you need to provide the most conducive conditions for compassion to arise. What do we mean by compassion? Mind moved by the suffering of others. It can't bear the pain of living beings. So if we have a lot of anger in our mind, then our compassion can't be strong, b/c you know compassion doesn't want living beings to suffer. Similarly, if we have strong pride, jealousy, then they will weaken our compassion. So what this means is we need to reduce these negative emotions so that compassion has the opportunity to develop in our mind. So the stronger compassion is, the more likely the mind of enlightenment can arise in our mind.

In essence, we are trying to generate compassion and bodhicitta in our mind. In order to be able to eventually generate the mind of enlightenment, we need to engage in certain preliminary practices. This is where we are in the root text. The practices to prepare our minds so that bodhicitta can eventually be generated.

In the beginning of this chapter, it's explained that we need to engage in certain practices to prepare the mind for bodhicitta. Some practices include making prostrations, making offerings, going for refuge and so on. We've arrived at the section that explains how to go for refuge.

The stanza that explains refuge is 26

2:26

Until the essence of enlightenment is reached,
I go for refuge to the Buddhas.
Also I take refuge in the Dharma
And in all the host of Bodhisattvas.

Refuge is of two types. There's "causal refuge" and "resultant refuge".

Let's identify the objects of refuge. "Until the essence of enlightenment is reached" – means before we attain enlightenment, it means we go for refuge to certain objects: Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. What's explained here is causal refuge. Before taking enlightenment – we take refuge to the Buddhas, Dharma, and Sangha.

Resultant refuge: going for refuge to our own future enlightenment. Our future achievements are also objects of refuge.

To identify causal and resultant refuge more clearly, we should understand that before attaining enlightenment, we can go for refuge to the 3 jewels. Our very act of going for refuge to them causes our future enlightenment. They are the objects of our causal refuge. In the future, we will attain enlightenment. That will occur. So that's the result of our training in the path, in the causes of enlightenment. When we place our trust in

this future state of enlightenment, then we are going for refuge to our future enlightenment and that's resultant enlightenment.

From among the 4 main sections, we've completed the first 3, making offerings, prostrations, and refuge. The fourth is important: confession. Confession of negativities. That's divided into several subsections. General presentation and specific explanation.

The confession of negativities has to occur by way of the complete 4 powers. These 4 powers are explained in a sutra called Sutra of the Four Dharmas. In the sutra, the Buddha says if a Bodhisattva presents the 4 Dharmas, although they've accumulated negativity, they will be cleared away. First is power of repudiation. Second is power of using the antidote. Third is power of turning away from misdeeds. Fourth is power of support.

If karma that's been created and accumulated – there are definitely karmas to be experienced. These can be purified by 4 powers complete. Then what need is there to talk about karmas to be experienced. So if we do vajrasattva, confession to the 35 Buddhas and so on, then definitely then we can purify the past misdeeds we've committed.

In the context of this text, Bodhisattva's Way of Life, the most important power from among these 4 powers is the first – the power of repudiation. Generating regret for having committed misdeeds in the past. So here in our text we will see an extensive explanation on how to engage in confession by generating strong regret. So one has to generate regret by confessing past misdeeds from the point of view of cause, time, preparation and so on.

Why is repudiation most important? b/c if you feel sorry for having done something unskillful, then you'll be interested in purifying that negativity. This is why it's very important to generate a sincere powerful regret because that is what causes you to do purification.

We request the objects to whom we perform confession for their attention. 27:

To perfect Buddhas and Bodhisattvas,
In all directions where they may reside,
To them who are the sovereigns of great mercy,
I press my palms together praying thus:

Before we can begin the actual confession, we need to bring to mind the objects to whom we perform the confession. In this case, we bring in mind the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas of the 10 directions. Please think of me with compassion.

What do we say to them after having brought them to mind? The next 2 stanzas re time and cause aspects:

28

“In this and all my other lives,
While turning in the round without beginning
Blindly I have brought forth evil,
And incited others to commit the same.

29

“Deceived and overmastered by my ignorance,
I have taken pleasure in such sin,
And seeing now the blame of it,
O great protectors, I confess it earnestly!

So sincerely we need to offer our confession to the Buddhas. We need to reflect on the fact that we've committed many unskillful actions. So it's impossible to pinpoint a certain time and say that I started existing from this time onwards and before that I didn't exist. So existence is beginningless. So if we create 1 negativity in each of our past lives and now we would have created countless negativities, and of course, we create more than 1 negativity. We create many negativities. So we've accumulated many misdeeds. If we fail to purify them, then we are basically going to be in a very sorry state. So in distant previous lives, I've created many negative actions. I confess them all – those I created, and those that I caused others to create – instigated, although I didn't – I caused them to create them or the ones I rejoiced in. The ones that I didn't create but I rejoiced when I learned the ones others did. So this is many many negativities. So these I confess to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

We assert past and future lives. We talk about our existence without beginning. Of course, this is not something that everyone accepts. There are certain philosophies that deny past and future lives. In Buddhism, we assert the existence of past and future lives. We have the reasons to support such an assertion. Are you interested in exploring this?

How do we prove that past lives exist? Let's examine our present mind. The mind is a continuation of the mind that we have when we were small. We had a mind previously and that continued to exist and became our present life. So our mind isn't something that arose from physical elements. So talk about the 4 elements: earth, etc. Our mind didn't arise from some physical material. It didn't arise from some matter. So if you look at today's mind, you can understand that this is the continuity of yesterday's mind and that mind came from the mind before yesterday and so on. So if you try to trace the origin of your mind for this life, you'll see it can be traced to the mind of the baby in the mother's womb. So our present mind is a continuation of that mind that existed at the time when we were in our mother's womb.

This continuum of our mind is not something that is made up of unrelated sections. So it is not the case that there's some kind of interruption at some point and then the mind suddenly newly arises. So there's a continuity and for this reason, we can remember what happened to us when we were small. E.g. we think when I was small, I played with

such toys. I ate certain foods. I did this with my Mom and Dad. This is possible b/c of continuity between the mind when we were small and our present mind. This is because otherwise, if no continuity of past and present mind, then no way to recall what happened when we were small. No way to remember our experiences from an early part of our lives.

Indeed there are people who can remember things beyond this life. In other words, they can remember their past existences. The fact that such memory is possible is due to the fact that past and present minds belong to the same continuum. If this were not the case, if there were interruptions, then memory of past events would not be possible.

So this argument is contingent upon understanding the idea of continuity. So then our present mind comes from a previous mind that can be traced all the back to the mind that we were in our mother's womb. So if we extend this further, then we would arrive at an understanding that there were previous lives in which we existed.

Much more can be said. More explanations presented in texts. If you are interested in this topic, then think about the reasons we have explained. And if you have doubts, questions, you can bring them up in the future. It is through such analysis, exploration, that the existence of past lives become clearer.

In the second half of stanza 28:
“blindly I have brought forth evil,
And incited others to commit the same”.

We can incite others to do the negative action. E.g. we can tell them to lie / order them to steal. So when this occurs, there's double negativity – although we did not physically engage in this crime, the fact that we did it – we created the negativity. On top of that, this person engages in lying, stealing, so the result is double negativity.

Also rejoice in others' deeds creates misdeeds for ourselves. You hear that someone has murdered a certain person and upon hearing that, you rejoice. You feel well done. You think that's an evil person – it's great they've been killed. If you rejoice in others' misdeeds, then you also create misdeeds. So negative karma is also accumulated.

29
“Deceived and overmastered by my ignorance,
I have taken pleasure in such sin,
And seeing now the blame of it,
O great protectors, I confess it earnestly!

Doing misdeeds, causing others to do them and rejoicing in others' doing misdeeds – having taking pleasure in such negativities and seeing the drawbacks of such negativities – so O great protectors, I confess it. To the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, we confess the mistakes sincerely.

How to confess negativities in respect to special objects

30

“Whatever I have done against the Triple Gem,
Against my parents, teachers, and the rest,
Through force of my defilements,
In my body, speech, and mind,

When we create negative action, does it matter who we create this negative action in relation to. What this means is if you tell a lie to two persons – is the lie equally serious? If this person has special qualities, then the lie we tell will be more serious. So for example, if one lies to the Buddha, Bodhisattva, an Arya Being, or one’s father or mother, or an Arhat, who has discarded all afflictions, then the negativities that are created would be very heavy.

If we create some kind of misdeed in relation to a special being (Buddha, Bodhisattva, an Arya Being), we will create serious negative karma. We need to confess these. It’s possible that we’ve created negative karma to these great beings. The result is great suffering. Therefore, we need to purify these mistakes we’ve made. When we do our daily prayers or virtuous practice, we can bear in mind that we’ve created many negativities in relation to Buddha, Arhats and think about wanting to purify those mistakes. If you can think like that, it will have a very powerful effect on our practice. We’ll get more benefit from our practice than if we didn’t think about confessing our past negativities.

So why is it that when we do a certain action in relation to powerful beings, special beings, the karma is more powerful? E.g. the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas feel excellent qualities. They have special good qualities. So when we do some unskillful action in relation to that, we create heavy negativity. Similarly, our parents and teachers are what we call fields of kindness. We’ve received much benefit from them. If we harm them, we create serious misdeed. As for the Sangha, and spiritual guides, we create merit in relation to them. They are powerful fields for us to accumulate merit. If we do something unskill in relation to them, we create serious misdeeds. But the opposite is also true, if you create some virtuous action in relation to them, then the virtue you create is very powerful. It becomes 1000s of times than if you create that action in relation to an ordinary being.

31

How you can contemplate the undesirable results of negativities and to confess them with regret

“All the evil I, a sinner, have committed,
All the wicked deeds that cling to me,
The frightful things that I contrived
I openly declare to you, the teachers of the world.

In 31, it's explained that I have committed many kinds of negative actions. All kinds of wicked deeds. These negativities I openly declare to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Here, we understand through the unskillful actions we will experience undesirable results. Such as rebirth as hell realm, hungry ghosts and animals. We don't want those undesirable results. So I openly confess that I have done these negative actions and I regret doing these negative actions.

The next section talks about how one can fear how one will die without purifying one's misdeeds.

32

“it may be that my death will come to me
Before my evil has been cleansed.
How then can I be freed from it?
I pray you, quickly grant me your protection!”

Here, we request for protection quickly and the reason is we do not know when we will die. So some people live very long; some live very short. We cannot be sure how long we can live. So if we die before our negativities have been purified, then we'll be stuck with those for a while. So here we say as quickly as possible I want to be free from misdeeds. Quickly grant me your protection. I want to confess my negativities as soon as possible.

Reason for such urgency:

33

We cannot trust the wanton Lord of Death.
The task complete or still to do, he will not wait.
In health or sickness, therefore, none of us can trust
Our fleeting, momentary lives.

We cannot be sure when we will die. So it is not wise to think that well, I will get a chance to purify my negative karma before I die. I won't die now, so I'll do my confession later – next month, so on. So e.g. if I fall sick and then I die, then I'll do it. But that thinking is foolish b/c the fact that we're not sick doesn't mean we won't die soon. Some people don't fall sick and die. So what this means is as quickly as possible, we need to purify our negativities. Whether we fall sick or not, we can die quite suddenly. So it's important for us to purify our negativities as soon as possible.

What follows is a more elaborate manner on regret. 34: regret for doing things without realizing they are not trustworthy:

And we must pass away, forsaking all.
But I, devoid of understanding,
Have, for sake of friend and foe alike,
Provoked and brought about so many wrongs.

One day we have to leave everything behind. Even this body that has accompanied us since we were in our mother's womb needs to be left behind. Without understanding that we have to leave everything behind – body, friends and so on, we create negative actions. So in order to protect our friends, harm our enemies, we generated many forms of misdeeds. so these misdeeds have been created and they will stay with us unless we confess them.

35

But all my foes will cease to be,
And all my friends will cease to be,
And I will also cease to be,
And likewise everything will cease to be.

So no good reason for us to involve us in negative actions for the sake of friends and foes. This is because they will all pass. E.g. there are people whom we like. For their sake, we can engage in negative actions. Sometimes we are even willing to give up our lives in order to do things for people we like. However, not the case that they can accompany us for a long time. At the time of death, they are left behind. Eventually, they'll be nonexistent. Similarly, for people we don't like, we generate aversion and engage in actions to harm them, however, such actions are not worth it, because they will go out of existence themselves. They will cease to be. When they die – not like their souls will follow me and come with me to a future life. What's meant here is that these friends and foes that I attach so much importance to will just cease to be. They will just be nonexistent. I will just die. Any kind of negative action done in relation to them will not achieve any great purpose.

If someone says something nasty to your sister or brother or close to you, you may feel upset and you may try to retaliate by saying something nasty back. You may try to harm this person – do some unskillful action. But there's not much purpose in doing so b/c all these friends, and relatives – they will one day become nothing. No great purpose in creating negativities for their sake.

Next stanza explains how one can become fearful due to negative actions.

36

All that I possess and use
Is like the fleeting vision of a dream.
It fades into the realms of memory,
And fading, will be seen no more.

This is saying that everything you possess and use is nothing more than the fleeting vision of a dream. When it fades away, it'll be nothing. E.g. in a dream, you may dream that you are eating some really delicious food or you are wearing fancy, beautiful clothes. But when you wake up from this dream, then you're just like on your bed, in your pajamas. Although you are wearing beautiful clothes in your dream, but when you wake

up, there's nothing. When you dream you are eating all kinds of delicious food in your dream you wake up you're hungry – food you ate in your dream did not benefit you in any way. You wake up feeling hungry. What this means is all the possessions, resources in this life will be like a dream. Eventually they'll become nothing.

Real life is like a dream. Yesterday you ate delicious food. How does that benefit you today? Thinking about that delicious food you ate yesterday will not fill your stomach. Whether food you eat is delicious or not, the effect is the same. Basically, no real tangible long term benefit of experiences of pleasure, displeasure and so on. In that sense, real life is like a dream.

So no point to clinging to events in this life. Whatever happens will eventually become a memory. No concrete essence that you can really hold onto. So everything will just fade away – don't cling to things as permanent.

So the next stanza talks about how we see how these things are unreliable, yet we still create negativity. This is a cause for regret.

37

And even in the brief course of this present life,
So many friends and foes have passed away,
Because of whom, the evils I have done
Still lie, unbearable, before me.

In stanza 37, it's stated that many friends and foes have passed away. Friends and foes are not permanent entities. When we look at how we live our lives, we are preoccupied with these relationships – people we like, dealing with our enemies and so on. But the reality is that there's no such absolute friend / foe. Can be in early part of life, someone we like really like – our dear friend but in the later part of our life, this person becomes our hated enemy. Opposite can occur. Someone we dislike in our earlier part of life can after several years become our best friend. So friends and foes aren't permanent.

In second half of stanza 37,

Because of whom, the evils I have done
Still lie, unbearable, before me.

The negativities we created in earlier part of our life won't vanish. Let's say you have someone whom you like dearly in an early part of life and for their sake, you engage in unskillful actions. Later, they become enemy. So the fact that the relationship between you and this person changed won't cancel out the negativities you've created. All negativities you've created still lie unbearable before you.