

English Dharma talk
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A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life (Bodhicaryavatara) – Class 12

By Shantideva

In Three principles of the path, he says that regarding the wish to be free from samsara,

for you embodied beings bound by the craving for existence, without pure determination to be free from ocean of existence, there's no way for you to pacify the attractions to its pleasurable effects

therefore, from the outset, seek to generate the determination to be free – renunciation.

So the first half of this stanza explains that it's necessary to generate a pure aspiration for liberation. We all want happiness. If we do not identify what happiness really is, then we will not be able to achieve our goal. We need to know happiness as it is. And recognize the best forms of happiness. As explained here, for us, who are bound by the craving for existence, we need to generate this pure determination to be free from samsara in order for us to get out of samsara.

It's necessary for us to generate renunciation. What this is is a wish to be free from suffering in a complete manner. We want to emerge from cyclic existence. We want to obtain the state of cessation, of every form of unhappiness. This is the aspiration for liberation that we need to generate in order to eventually become free from samsara.

So it is necessary for us to have a clear understanding of what suffering is. We need to know what the types of suffering are. Without knowing what suffering really is, what causes of suffering are, then we will not be able to generate a true wish to become free from suffering. This means that even though we may not desire pain, we may not desire suffering, misery, but we will not have a good basis for being free from suffering b/c we don't know what it is and can't identify it. If we want to attain liberation, we need to know suffering as it is. By generating the wish to be completely liberated from suffering, we will eventually have the possibility of obtaining cessations, of obtaining liberation.

So it's crucial for us to seek this aspiration to be free at the outset. Because without this wish, we can't be free from cyclic existence one day. E.g. there are non-Buddhists who engage in a practice that is called the practice having the aspects of coarseness and peace. What this is is a practice of meditative concentration in which one tries to subdue the afflictions of the desire realm. Through such a technique, one is reborn in an upper realm. So they label such a state as liberation. One becomes free from coarse sufferings. One obtains higher rebirth. In that state of heavenly existence, one experiences peace. That's labeled liberation by certain non-Buddhists. However, when afflictions of that

higher level manifest, they realize there is more to be done, so they try to subdue the afflictions of that level and aim for an even higher level in which more peace is experienced. However, that is not the final state. This is still in samsara. In time they would have to work for rebirth at a higher level. All the way until they reach the peak of cyclic existence. According to them, they are all states of liberation. But according to Buddhists, they are all still within samsara. The pleasurable states are temporary and one can lose them. If we fail to clearly identify what true happiness is, and its causes, what is suffering and its causes, then we will end up being trapped in cyclic existence. Therefore, it is important to recognize suffering and happiness exactly as they are and on that basis, generate a genuine wish to be free from samsara.

In order to be genuinely exploring the possibility of liberation, we need to know whether or not it is possible to obtain liberation. Is there a method that can liberate us from samsara?

So is it possible to obtain liberation? Is there a method that can make us completely free from suffering? All of us have Buddha-nature: the innate clarity of our mind. Our mind has the nature of clear light. And it is not inherently polluted. Even though it may have certain stains polluting it at this point in time, those stains are adventitious: if we apply antidotes, those stains / faults can be removed. And when we remove these stains, then our mind becomes clearer in the sense that its clear light nature becomes more manifest. This is a kind of development of the mind. The more stains we discard, the more our mind is able to develop. Eventually the clear light nature of the mind will be revealed. Therefore, it is possible for us to obtain liberation.

So the stains that exist upon our mind are adventitious. The coarse stains are the three poisons or 6 root afflictions. Our minds are affected by anger, attachment, and ignorance. We have to check if these minds are valid minds. Is anger a valid mind? When we check how anger relates to its observed object, we can see it regards the object as completely repulsive. 100% unattractive. If this is really the way the object exists, then anger is valid mind and since it is factually concordant, there is no way for us to eliminate anger. But if you analyze whether or not the object is truly repulsive, annoying and so on, you will find that is not the case. b/c there is projection involved. Anger is a mind that superimposes non-existent faults onto the object. It exaggerates whatever qualities the object and makes it seem negative. Since this is an erroneous mind, it superimposes what is not there in reality, it can be corrected. So we can discard this erroneous mind through the force of antidotes.

When we investigate nature of afflictive emotions in mind, we see they don't accord with reality. Because they are a distortion of reality, it is possible for us to correct these minds by applying antidotes that are factually concordant that see reality as it is. We can eliminate erroneous minds. Things that see in the wrong manner. E.g. if we have angry minds, we see things as worse than they really are. We see things as annoying, repulsive, etc. we can cultivate opposite states of mind: cultivate love, etc. we can cultivate affection in order to counteract aversion. By cultivating the counteracting antidotes, we can eliminate negative states of mind. Eventually, we'll arrive at the state of liberation.

So understanding the possibility of liberation, we will generate a strong wish wanting to attain liberation and this is precisely the mind of renunciation, aspiration for liberation – this stanza from the 3 principle aspects of the path. We need to familiarize with this mind again and again. One day we will be able to generate this wish spontaneously. At day and night we will think: samsara is not a good place to be in. I need to obtain liberation. This is the mind of renunciation that we are advised to generate.

If we generate such an aspiration to be free from samsara, we will be able to obtain liberation of individual vehicle and become a Hinayana Arhat or Foe-Destroyer.

To this mind wanting to attain liberation, we can add an extra dimension. This means on top of this mind wanting to liberate oneself from samsara, we can add the concern for all other living beings. We can think: they also need to be liberated. We can generate this mind wanting to become enlightened for all sentient beings. This is bodhicitta, the mind of enlightenment.

On top of renunciation and bodhicitta, we can add “correct view” of emptiness. By adding this third aspect, then we have the method to attain full enlightenment. These then comprise the techniques required for us to acquire Buddhahood.

As I mentioned, first, we need to generate the aspiration to be free from samsara. On top of that, we need to generate bodhicitta. One the methods for generating bodhicitta is equalizing and exchanging self and others. This is explained in Treatise: Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life by Shantideva. This is renowned as one of the best reasons for generating bodhicitta.

Stanza 2.38

The thought came never to my mind
That I too am a brief and passing thing.
And so, through hatred, lust, and ignorance,
I have committed many sins.

Topic: death and impermanence. For westerners who encounter Buddhism in the beginning, they may find the discussion quite distasteful and even scary.

So the first half of the stanza said:

The thought came never to my mind
That I too am a brief and passing thing.

This means we don't really think about our death. We all wish that we live a long life. But the reality is the life span is uncertain. This is because there are many conditions that can interrupt the continuum of our existence and cause us to die. There are very few conditions that can sustain us in a very stable manner. So really we don't know how long we will live. We don't know when our life will end. So some people thinking that they

will live a long time commit negative actions for the sake of this long existence they think they will have. But they can be caught unexpectedly. Death can descend upon them. And they have not purified their negativities. They have not confessed the negative actions they've done. If they were to die suddenly, all the negative karma will be carried to the future existence. We can develop this illusion that we will live for a very long time b/c we are relatively healthy. If we fall sick we can go to hospital to get free treatment. We may be complacent. Reality is: we can't be sure. If we don't engage in practice, we create negativities and we fail to purify them thinking we'll live a long time, then we'll be in trouble by the time of death.

So second half:

And so, through hatred, lust, and ignorance,
I have committed many sins.

In Buddhism, this talk of death is very important b/c it makes us prepare. Near death, we want to generate positive state of mind, recite prayers or try to engage in other forms of virtue. E.g. reciting om mani padme hum.

One of you recites Om Mani Padme Hum a lot. This is a good tradition. What Tibetans do a lot. When becomes a good habit, when we are in states of emergency, difficult situations, then naturally we'll be able to engage in such a practice.

In Vinaya scriptures on discipline, Buddha explained compared to the merit of making offerings to my disciples such as Shariputra and one more, one moment of reflection on death and impermanence will give far more merit.

So why did the Buddha said this? b/c when we remember we won't last forever, it will urge us to develop ourselves spiritually so that we will engage in purification and the accumulation of merit. Another benefit of thinking about impermanence is that we will be encouraged to create virtue again and again. Eventually we will be directed in the direction of realizing emptiness. So thinking about impermanence has these benefits. Therefore, there's greater purpose to us remembering impermanence.

So reflecting on impermanence has the effect of making us live a good life such that our minds will become more peaceful. One might think if I think about death and impermanence, this will make me stressed. But not the case. The fact that you do not reflect on impermanence does not mean you will not die. Not the case that avoiding the topic can help you avoid dying. If we think about impending death, as mentioned above, there are benefits. We will be urged to engage in spiritual practice. So while we are alive, we will be living our life in a meaningful way. So at death, we will have peace. Conversely, if we don't think about death and just live our life in an unguided manner, at the time of death, we might really panic and think I didn't create virtue in my life; I created negative actions and generate regret and worry.

Stanza 39

Nothing can be added to our life; our life is being exhausted continuously. It is definite we will die. If we were to die without purifying our negativities, then we will experience fear.

Never halting, night or day,
My life drains constantly away
And from no other source does increase come.
How can there not be death for such as me?

Explains the certainty of death. In lam rim teachings, there's one such outline: certainty of death. We have to think about the fact that our life drains away constantly, never halting. As time passes, our life also passes. There's nothing that can be done to stop this process and prevent our life from becoming shorter and shorter. What's worse, there's no other source that can add to our life. No way to lengthen our life.

Next says if one doesn't purify one's negativities, one's friends and relatives can't prevent us from suffering.

6 lines explain this:

2.40

There I'll be, prostrate upon my bed,
And all around, my family and friends.
But I alone shall be the one to feel
The cutting of the thread of life.

2.41

And when the heralds of the Deadly King have gripped me,
What help to me will be my friend and kin?

We have to purify our negativities as soon as we can. b/c when we lie on our deathbed, our loved ones will be filled with worry. They'll be filled with sorrow but they can't help us purify our negativities. They will of course try to satisfy our every whim if they can help us with material needs and so on. But we can't tell them, please take away my negative karma. They can't. so what this means is when the messenger of the Lord of Death comes, our friends and family can't help us. So we need to purify our negativities before we lie on the deathbed. We shouldn't think I can do this later. If we've found we've done something negative, then we try to purify as soon as we can and not wait until it's accumulated.

Next explains: when we haven't created merit, at death, we may feel worry.

2.41

...

For then life's virtue is my one defense,
And this, alas, is what I shrugged away.

If we cultivate positive states of mind (love, compassion), we try to help others, benefit others, then our merit will help us at the time of death and really nothing else can help us at the time of death. If we ignored those practices then at the time of death, we'll be overcome by regret. We'll think I should have done that. I didn't do that. I should've done positive virtue. That will make us very remorseful so important that we engage in virtue.

2.42

Oh protectors! I, so little heeding,
Had hardly guessed at horror such as this –
And all for this brief, transient existence,
I have done so many evil things.

So horror at death. One can feel regret. Buddhists might call out to the Buddha: Tibetan expression: Buddha, think of me. Maybe Western Christians may call out My God. It is basically an expression of fear and regret.

However, generating regret at that time is too late. When one's lying on one's deathbed, one may be ill and weak. One doesn't have the power to really engage in really deep Dharma practice.

Next 2 stanzas: why one can experience great fear at that point in time

2.43

The day they take him to the scaffold,
Where they will tear off his limbs,
A man is changed, transfigured by this fear:
His mouth is dry, his eyes start from his brow.

2.44

No need to say how stricken I shall be
When overcome and sick with dreadful fear,
I'm seized by forms so horrible to see,
The frightful servants of the Lord of Death.

43 gives this analogy of how fearful one will be and 44 explains the meaning that is illustrated. Let's say there's a person whose limbs will be torn or chopped. Imagine how terrified this person will be. He will be completely petrified by fear even though this punishment that he'll receive doesn't involve taking his life. If such a person experienced so much fear then how much fear would we experience if we have to face the Lord of Death and seized by these messengers of the Lord of Death?

Next 2 explain how one's overwhelmed by suffering after that.

2.45

Who can give me safe protection
From this horror, from this frightful dread?
And then I'll search the four directions
Seeking help, with panic-stricken eyes.

2.46

But in those four directions no protection shall I find.
And I shall sink into despairing woe.
No refuge will there be for me;
At such a time, what shall I do?

These explain what happens when we are in negative rebirth. One will be looking for protection, so one will look in the four cardinal directions and four intermediate directions but at that time, there will not be a protector to be found. This means one will be overwhelmed by distress.

These stanzas seem to express state of panic in which we can't find anyone to protect us. However, not the case there's no method to prevent this fear and terror. There is a method and it will be explained next. So far we've discussed the power of repudiation. Now the second of the four powers: power of the support.

Look at how we will go for refuge through the three jewels. In fact, we should rely on the three jewels for refuge right now.

This part explains that in order to find protection from fear, we can rely on the three jewels **right now**, well before the time of death. If we prepare by reflecting on possible forms of suffering and so on, we will generate the sense of dread. This sense of dread then will cause us to go to the 3 jewels right now for refuge.

The 2 stanzas:

2.47

Thus, from this day forward I take refuge
To the Buddhas, guardians of begins
Who labor to protect all wanderers,
Those mighty ones who scatter every fear.

2.48

And in the Dharma they have realized in their hearts,
Which drives away the terrors of samsara,
And in all the host of Bodhisattvas
Likewise I will perfectly take refuge.

If you can memorize the above 2, that's great. They are very useful. Whenever you experience fear, you can bring them to mind. Even during times when you're not

experiencing fear (free time), you can think about the meaning. They help you go for refuge to the 3 jewels.

The first of the 2 expresses heartfelt refuge in the Buddhas. The Buddhas are constantly thinking of protecting all living beings. Not only want to protect all beings from here but also able to eliminate the fear of sentient beings in the sense that some beings are not experiencing fear. Buddhas can prevent them from experiencing fear. For those already experiencing fear, Buddhas can help eliminate those fears. Not only are Buddhas able to help me but also all living beings. By thinking of this wonderful ability, one goes to refuge to the Buddhas. From this day forward. Take refuge right now, sincerely from the bottom of our hearts.

47 expresses refuge to Buddhas. 48 to the next 2 jewels: Dharma and Sangha jewel. In 48, we have taken refuge in the actual refuge: the Dharma jewel is the actual refuge. By taking refuge in the Dharma, we can drive away all fears of samsara. Also we've taken refuge in the Sangha jewel.

These 2 stanzas can be recited any time we feel afraid that we need protection; not only that, these can be recited when we witness the suffering of others. From the bottom of our heart, we want them to be free from suffering. Motivated by this wish, we can recite these 2 stanzas. This can possibly bring some relief. And for sure, it will help us develop our mind.

One might think: how do I implement this in practice?

Let's say a person is very sick. He's lying in bed overcome by pain. And then he wants to recover from his sickness. Simply by lying in bed wishing that he'll recover will not cause a doctor to appear by his bed side for him to receive treatment. If one needs treatment, one wants, one needs to go to a doctor.

What this example illustrates is that one has to actively seek out a solution. If one wants to be free from suffering, not sufficient just to wish that suffering will go away. One has to actively seek out refuge and seek out the methods that will enable one to be free from suffering. As a Buddhist, we can go for refuge. In our mind, we generate the thought to refuge to the 3 jewels. We also generate this thought I will follow your advice. I will practice your instructions. Only through such active steps that we will receive protection.

Next 2 explain how to rely on Bodhisattvas

2.49

Gripped by dread, beside myself with anguish,
To Samantabhadra I will give myself;
My body I myself will give
To Manjughosha, gentle and melodious.

2.50

To him whose deeds of mercy never fail,
My lord Avalokita,
I cry out from depths of misery,
“Protect me now an evildoer!”

These 2 stanzas: meaning is clear. We are afraid of the dangers that we face. We want the Bodhisattvas to protect us. So we request Samantabhadra, Manjushri, and Avalokiteshvara – protect me, I’ve done negative deeds; please protect me.

There are many Bodhisattvas. Why do we call out to these 3? Samantabhadra represents the Supreme Praise. He is renowned for being able to accomplish powerful prayers. Manjushri embodies Buddha’s wisdom. One also requests Manjushri for help. Avalokiteshvara embodies compassion. These Bodhisattvas embody very powerful qualities so we call out to them for help.

We request them to protect us. This is because in the past we have created many negativities. In our past lives, we have possibly created so many negative actions that we do not remember now. We request Bodhisattvas for protection.

51 and 52 explain:

2.51

Now to the noble one Akashagarbha
And to Kshitigarbha, from my heart I call.
To all protectors, great, compassionate,
I cry to them in search of refuge.

2.52

And to Vajrapani, I shall fly,
For at the sight of him
All vengeful things like Yama’s host
Escape in terror to the four directions.

There are these 8 Bodhisattvas known as the Buddha’s Great Sons. To them I go for refuge.

Next section explains how one should practice according to the advice by the three jewels. We don’t just stop at refuge. We need to follow guidelines they taught.

Today we have an unsettling time discussing how to generate fear at suffering. This is because if we do not experience any form of dread for suffering, we have no fear whatsoever, then no reason for us to go for refuge. By reflecting on nature of suffering, generating fear, then we will be motivated to take refuge. To seek protection. That is what the point is all about. Then having gone for refuge, we will follow the instructions given by objects of refuge. This is like if a person is sick, they will have to employ methods to recover from the sickness. In our case, this sickness cannot be eliminated

through physical medicine. We need to engage in methods to train the mind. Therefore, this week, we have discussed fear. So you can reflect on this fear and in the next week, we will talk about instructions to be implemented based on having gone for refuge.

When should you reflect on death and impermanence? In my opinion, not when you go to bed. There's danger you won't be able to sleep well. Next morning, exhausted, go to work, may cause difficulty. Maybe best in the morning to reflect. How your life is transient. You will be motivated to create virtue. So I think that reflecting on death is good in the morning.

Question: I wonder if Geshela thinks it's good to read about the Tibetan Book of the Dead

I think it can be beneficial for students to read this book because it basically introduces the intermediate process. The intermediate state to you. After one dies, one passes through this stage and what happens is different stages of absorption. Different elements absorb and so on. By reading this book, you'll get an idea of what happens in the intermediate state.

It is important to make preparations for death. What this means is while we are well and alive, we can study the mind training techniques that are offered in the Mahayana teachings. Also, if we are familiar with the completion stage techniques of highest tantra yoga, we can bring those to mind at the time of death. The practice has to start well before the time of death. So doing nothing while we are well in life and thinking if I know about intermediate stage now and I can do something then might not be so easy.

There was a huge discussion about this text on this we-chat group. Some say this practice of reading this book is really useful. What happens is a person is dying and on his deathbed, the person reads this text as a means of guiding through the death process. Hopefully, this person can attain high realizations and become an Arya. This being who realizes reality. Not everyone agrees with this position. Some say in that case, no need to practice the Dharma; all you ensure is that someone reads this text to you when you die. There are different viewpoints. I think it would be very difficult for this practice to be successful if you don't do practice during life and puts hopes on someone just reading this text to oneself when one's dying.

Content: how to take the 3 states (death, intermediate state, and rebirth) into exalted bodies of the Buddha. As elements absorb, one is guided to reflect on how to take the stage of death into a Buddha body. First, one takes death into the Dharmakaya, Dharmabody. As the subtle mind of death approaches, one is instructed to reflect on emptiness. When one enters the intermediate state, one is guided to take the intermediate state into the path of the Sambhogakaya, the complete enjoyment body of the Buddha. When one takes rebirth, one is guided to take that into Nirmanakaya, the path of the emanation body. If one has not received any initiation before, one has not engaged in any related practice before, it would be very hard for one to receive such instructions only and obtain some kind of highly realized state. I don't deny there's benefit in this practice in

reading this text but I think in order for you to derive the full benefit of this practice, many conditions need to come together.

Question from a young child: can there be a female Buddha?

Answer: yes, there's Tara and he's a female Buddha.