

English Dharma talk
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A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life (Bodhicaryavatara) – Class 14

By Shantideva

We reflect on a stanza spoken by the Buddha in the great plain sutra:

Merit yields the fruitional result of happiness and dispels all suffering
The wishes of one who is endowed with merit will be fulfilled
Having quickly destroyed the demons one will quickly achieve the coolness of nirvana
and peace

Merit yields the fruitional result of happiness and dispels all suffering

We all want happiness. Where does it come from? Merit. If we have merit then we will be able to experience the result of happiness. Not only that, merit helps to dispel all suffering. What do we do having dispelled the negativities and obscurations that cause suffering? We will be able to fulfill our wishes.

The wishes of one who is endowed with merit will be fulfilled

If one has a rich collection of merit then whatever one wishes for will be fulfilled. Similarly, if one wants to extend help to others, those wishes will be fulfilled.

The second line says that one who is endowed with merit will be able to fulfill his/her goals. When we talk about these goals, there are various goals. E.g. in this life, we may wish for long life, good health, free from sicknesses; good friends and companions. All these wishes can be fulfilled if we have plenty of merit.

If we want to have good existence beyond this life, we can achieve that by a huge collection of merit. If we want to free from lower realms, we want to be reborn as human / god, then we need a huge collection of merit.

Looking even further beyond states of existence, the final goal that we can possibly achieve is the state of liberation / enlightenment.

The final goal that we can possibly reach is the goal of liberation / enlightenment. If we practice the Mahayana, then we want to attain Buddhahood.

If we are practitioners of Hinayana, then we want to aim for personal liberation; state of personal nirvana or Hinayana Foe-Destroyer or Arhat. What prevents us from reaching

this final state? Demons. Having destroyed the demons, one will quickly reach enlightenment and so on.

If we accumulate merit, then we are able to destroy the demons and maras and in that way, achieve enlightenment.

Since merit is so important, it brings us all the various levels of happiness that we can possibly wish for, how do we accumulate merit?

So as long as we are in samsara, we will experience problems from time to time. It is impossible to avoid problems as long as we are in cyclic existence. When we run into difficulties, we should not feel discouraged. We should understand the situation is really quite fluid. We encounter problems b/c we don't have enough merit. We have too little merit and we create misdeeds – unskillful actions. As a result, we experience difficulty. So we need to engage in confession to purify our negativities and we need to engage in practices that increase our virtues to create merit. E.g. we can do certain practices like prayers to increase merit and so on. By acting this way, we create space in our mind. As I mentioned early on, by engaging in purification of negativities, we will be able to experience better physical health and avoid sicknesses and so on. The creation of merit brings many benefits: long life, peace and happiness and so on. If we want this, we need to strive for greater merit.

We do the last 3 stanzas and then summarize the essential points of chapter 2.

We are in the section explaining confession. 63 and 64: what one has to confess. What one needs to confess and how to confess are explained. 63: what one needs to confess.

2.63

The wrongs that I have done
Through ignorant stupidity;
All actions evil by their nature
And transgressions of the precepts,

In the stanza 63 we identify the objects that we want to confess. First half talks about the wrongs I have done through stupidity. We want to confess anything through ignorance. For that reason, we say we are confessing wrongs through ignorance. These wrongs are of 2 types: first, in the third line – actions evil by nature (actions that are naturally negative – natural misdeeds – these include e.g. 10 nonvirtues – they are negative by nature). 2nd part: transgressions of the precepts – second type of negativities is called “stipulated misdeeds”. You take vows – Buddha stipulates: if you do this, this is a misdeed and so on. So if we transgress those vows, we do things that contradict those vows, then we create some negativity. So all these mistakes are confessed. Not only do I confess the ones I've done myself but also those where I rejoiced in others doing negative actions. If we witness others doing bad and we rejoice – we confess these. On top of that, there are negative actions we cause others to do. Those we also confess.

64 explains how we confess.

2.64

Fearing all the pains to come
I join my palms and ceaselessly prostrate,
And everything I will confess
Directly in the sight of my protectors.

When we perform confession, we can visualize in front of us the Buddhas. My protectors. Physically we join our palms and make prostrations. We bow down before them. In our mind we have this sincere intention to confess the mistakes we have committed. We understand that due to misdeeds we have created in the past, only problems will arise. We do not want problems / suffering. So from the bottom of our heart, we request Buddhas to help us be free from these negativities. We fear problems and suffering that we will have to face in the future. With this sense of dread: we generate this wish to purify all our negativities. In the sight of our protectors, we confess all our wrong actions.

Stanza 65:

2.65

I pray you, guides and guardians of the world,
To take me as I am, a sinful man.
And all these actions, evil as they are,
I promise I will never do again.

In stanza 65, we are bringing to mind Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. We openly confess the negative actions we have created in the past. We understand there are no better objects of refuge than the 3 jewels. So before them, we confess the negative actions as we have created and we request the Buddhas to accept us. We promise we will not repeat our mistakes, understanding these actions bring negative consequences. We resolve never to create them again.

In the Tibetan text, the chapter always ends by stating the title of the chapter. However, in Chinese / English, we always say it at the start.

This is the chapter on confession, the 2nd from a Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life.

Let us go through chapter 2 by way of summary. First, we want to create merit. And how can we create merit? Many ways. E.g. meditate on Guru Yoga. Meditate on bodhicitta: mind of enlightenment. Many methods.

e.g. if we engage in Guru Yoga, then we accumulate merit by means of the 7 limb practice.

What are the 7 limbs?

1. Prostrations
2. Making offerings
3. Confession
4. Rejoicing
5. Requesting the Buddhas to turn the wheel of Dharma
6. Requesting the Buddhas not to pass away into nirvana
7. Dedication of merit

Which of these 7 limbs are discussed in chapter 2? You will see: prostrations at the beginning of the chapter; then offerings; then confession. So we have the first 3 of the 7 limbs.

The first of the 7 limbs is that of prostrations. Prostrations can be performed by means of body, speech or mind. In terms of body, we can do long prostrations / short ones. During these prostrations, we can touch 3 parts of our body to the ground / four parts. We can also simply join our palms – that would be a form of prostration as well. In terms of verbal prostrations, we can praise the Buddhas. We can express their good qualities. We can also recite their name mantras. In terms of mental prostrations, this refers to a mind of faith / confidence in the objects of refuge.

Before we engage in the prostrations, we should visualize the objects of refuge in the space before us. We generate this motivation: I want to be able to lead all sentient beings to the state of highest enlightenment. For this reason, I prostrate. So adjust mind to bodhicitta. Think objects of refuge fill entire space. Pay homage to them. Can think all sentient beings take form of humans; and I lead all of them in making prostrations.

Second limb is making offerings. In chapter 2 we have seen a very extensive form of making offerings. Visualize the bath chamber and offer bath and clothes and ornaments and so on. If you are not able to do this offering in such a manner by recalling the verses of this chapter, you can always offer what you eat and drink on a daily basis. Before you eat / drink something, visualize your own Guru, Shakyamuni and so on and think I offer this food and drink to you. You can recite the offering verse if you can. If not, you can just visualize making offerings to them. That way, you can accumulate merit quite easily. We eat and drink many times a day. I think on a daily basis, likely 10 times. At least there are the 3 main meals during which you eat food. Other times drink tea and water. Assuming you eat and drink 10 times a day, and you can offer, then this means you will make offering 10 times a day. In 2 days, 20 offerings; a month, 300 offerings. So the offering of the food is a great way to accumulate plenty of merit.

We naturally try to eat / drink what's the best available to us. If we make offerings with those food substances / drinks, then we are making good quality offerings. So this happens very naturally. I'm saying this b/c sometimes when you purposely go to the store to buy something specifically on the altar and due to lack of conscientiousness, you just choose poor quality offering. So then this affects the quality of the practice. If you offer what you eat and drink yourself, naturally it becomes a good quality offering.

e.g. during the weekend, when we go shopping, and if we buy something for ourselves, usually best quality – e.g. organic. But if we just think something to put on the altar, then usually not buy organic. What this means is if you offer what you yourself are going to drink and eat, then it's likely the quality is the best one. By offering that very food and drink that you intended for yourself, then you actually make the best offering.

What we offer should be what we ourselves find attractive and pleasant and good. If you make that kind of offering, you achieve the greatest benefit. We eat and drink many times a day. If we remember to make offerings every time we eat / drink, then continually we accumulate merit. There are so many opportunities to make merit just b/c we eat / drink so many times. By doing that, we can also make the offering a good quality offering.

I'd like to add a point regarding making prostrations. Whenever we see some holy image, we can place our palms together as a sign of respect. That also creates virtue. In the monasteries, the monks usually make 3 prostrations after get up from bed in the morning and another 3 before going to bed. I'm not saying everyone does that but most monks have that habit. On a daily basis, one accumulates 6 prostrations. Over 20 years, how many will be performed. Over a longer: 40 years, many many would have been accumulated.

We can make water offerings. If you make a set of offerings of 7 water bowls every day then over a period of 10 / 15 years, you would have made many! I just calculated. We have 35 water bowls at the Centre. By making 35 water bowl offerings every day, in 1 year, 12,000 offerings would have been made. I've been here 2 years. So I did 24,000 water bowl offerings. Daily not much but over long time, lots!

The most important content of chapter 2 is the third practice of confession. What is most crucial about this confession practice is the 4 powers. The 4 opponent powers need to be as complete as possible. If you are able to perform the 4 powers in their entirety as explained in the scriptures, then no matter how great the negativity, it can be purified.

Among these 4 opponent powers, we have first the power of repudiation. What is this repudiation? It's the mind of regret. And among the 4, this power is the most important because if you have this mind of regret, in full force, then the others will follow in a natural way.

What is the result of negativities? Suffering. If we have created very huge negative actions, then it can cause rebirth in the hell realms; if less heavy, hungry ghost; if less, animal realm.

We have to reflect on the fact that if we do not confess the misdeeds we created, then these will bring us problems in the future. They will cause us misery. Reflecting this way, one will generate regret for having done those negative actions and generate wish for confessing them.

Having generated the mind of regret, one wants to engage in the method to want to purify the negativities. One looks for objects to support this purification process. The 2nd power. This involves going for refuge in the 3 jewels and mind of enlightenment and bodhicitta.

We've already generated regret for past misdeeds. We've generated power of support by going for refuge to the 3 jewels. By generating bodhicitta for all sentient beings.

Third power is of remedy. E.g. prostrations, recite vajrasattva's 100 syllable mantra and so on. Here, we engage in physical or verbal activity to serve as an antidote to our negativities.

Fourth power: resolution. Determination not to repeat our mistakes. This is important b/c if while we are confessing our negativities, we create new ones. Then really we are not purifying effectively. Here, as we do confession, we resolve not to create misdeeds again in the future.

These 2 practices (confession and accumulating merit) must go hand in hand.

It is important for us to accumulate merit and engage in purification b/c if we do not do these together, then it's possible for the negativities that we have created to somehow overwhelm the little merit we have. Chapter 3 we will look at the remaining 4 of the 7 limbs.

To give you an e.g. of purification and accumulating merit together. House: old things – arranged all around the house: old, rusty. You buy 1 new article. It's likely this new object will change the atmosphere. Someone might visit and they might completely miss this new object you bought b/c the other objects are old and dusty and so overwhelming. They do not pay any attention to this new article you have added to the things in the house. What this illustrates is if you have a huge store of negativities and you try to create a little bit of virtue, that virtue will be overwhelmed by long history of negativities and it can't actualize in its positive potential. So important for us to create virtue and purify negativities. As you buy new articles to add to your house you throw out the old articles. If you do this at the same time, then eventually you will come to a point where house is filled with new things.

It is important to engage in confession. If we leave our negativities as they are, then they will actually block the arising of good qualities. We may want to generate great compassion, bodhicitta, the view of emptiness in our mind. If we do not engage in confession, then our past misdeeds will prevent generation of these excellent qualities and realizations. As I mentioned before, if you are going to invite a very important person to your house, e.g. His Holiness, then you need to ensure the house is cleaned properly. After that, furnish it nicely. Make all the possible arrangements so the house is fit to receive an important guest. So what this illustrates is if we engage in confession, and on that basis create merit, that will help create virtues: compassion, bodhicitta, and the view of emptiness.

We can also take advice from Lama Tsongkhapa's life story. Lama Tsongkhapa was able to perceive Manjushri directly and receive teachings from Manjushri. When Manjushri explained emptiness's meaning to him, he had problem understanding. So Manjushri told him: confession, accumulate merit and study. If you do the 3, then you can comprehend the meaning of emptiness. Lama Tsongkhapa took that advice to heart and he went to a hermitage with 8 disciples and there they engaged in very intensive practice. They did e.g. 100,000 sets of 35 prostrations to do confession.

Also story of Asanga: who wanted to meet Maitreya to receive teachings. Over a period of 12 years, he engaged in the practice of Maitreya but did not succeed. He gave up his practice. He encountered this dog with festering wound and maggots crawling about in the wound. When he witnessed that, he was overwhelmed by compassion for the dog and maggots, that exceptional generation of compassion purified his negativities and he was able to meet Maitreya face to face. What this illustrates is purification of negativities is very important. Therefore, important for us to do confession practice.

That is all I have to say about chapter 2. There are these 3 main sections: if there is any point that is not clear, please ask questions and I will clarify those points.

4 limbs

4. practice of rejoicing. This is taught to be very important.

The practice of rejoicing involves cultivating a mind of joy. In the sutras, the Buddha gave various useful instructions. So one can rejoice those instructions are given. After the Buddha passed away, one can recall the Buddha's wonderful deeds – his life. Turning the wheel of Dharma and cultivate joy from the bottom of our heart and in general, we can rejoice in any positive deed performed by anyone: virtues of Bodhisattvas and other living beings. Cultivating joy how wonderful this good deed is done. This is the practice of rejoicing.

By rejoicing we are able to accumulate merit without great hardship. If we as ordinary beings rejoice in the virtues of other ordinary beings who are the same level as us in terms of spiritual development, then we will create an equal amount of merit. If they create that merit, and we rejoice, we create that. If we rejoice in someone who is less developed than us, then it's said we in effect create more merit than that person. If we rejoice in someone who is more developed than us, then it's said we will accumulate half the merit accumulated by that person. Without much hardship, we can accumulate great merit.

5th limb: of turning the wheel of Dharma. We visualize the objects of refuge before us. We request the Buddhas to turn the wheel of Dharma for eons and eons and not stop teaching the Dharma.

6th limb: limb of requesting the Buddhas not to pass away into nirvana. We request the Buddhas to stay for a long time.

7th limb: dedication. We think by the virtues that have been created, my own virtues and virtues of all Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, may all sentient beings achieve happiness. May all sentient beings achieve happiness of full enlightenment.

This 7 limb practice appears most places: e.g. Guru Yoga; Lama Tsongkhapa Guru Yoga – the 100 deities of Tushita. So this is a practice that we find in most practices.

Question: when you offer water to the Buddha, do you need to filter the water b/c in the time of the Buddha, the monks were advised to pass the water through a sieve to rid bugs and so on?

Answer: in the past, the monks would get their water from e.g. streams and rivers and ponds. It's very likely that water contains organisms. So the Buddha advised the monks to filter the water before they use the water. However, these days I believe the water we use are already purified. So the water is already clean. We use it for drinking, preparing food and so on. So it seems to me no need to filter that water.

Question 2: Are there purification practices that are most powerful / efficient? E.g. if we need to purify stuff fast, what do we do?

Answer: If the 4 opponent powers are complete, then your purification will be very effective. I'm thinking that perhaps what you do with your body and speech will not make a great difference if the 4 opponent powers are complete. The Buddha taught purification practices such as confession to the 35 Buddhas / confession of the downfalls. The Buddha also taught the vajrasattva. I'm thinking they are short and easy for you to do. E.g. Vajracutter's / Diamond cutter's sutra is said to be very powerful in purifying negativities but if you are to recite it, you probably won't be able to recite it many times in 1 day. So it seems to me, the practices of the 35 Buddhas & vajrasattva are very efficacious and easy to do in a day: you can do many in a day.

If you try to engage in a practice that's long, there's danger you become tired and body is sluggish and your eyes hurt. b/c you're so exhausted, risk you lose the 4 opponent powers.

So my own thinking is keep the practice kind of convenient – easy to do and then make sure the 4 opponent powers are complete and to visualization of light and nectar descending and washing away negativities and that should work well.

If the practice involves reciting many words, there's danger we get lost in the recitation and fail to reflect on the meaning of the recitation. So in my opinion, doing the 35 Buddhas practice and vajrasattva practice is the best.

In this practice of confession to the 35 Buddhas, you recite the names of the 35 Buddhas, there are benefits to reciting each Buddha's name. You'll be astonished for how much is purified.

Question: do you have to do 35 Buddhas practice with prostrations? i.e. if I can't physically.

Not essential for you to do physical prostrations. What is most important is in your name you think of the Buddhas, whatever colour and so on. You visualize making prostrations to them, that's good enough. If you are not physically comfortable by standing up and bowing down and so on. You can just do the visualization.

Question: is 35 Buddhas equally powerful to Vajrasattva then, given what you taught about how much is purified by reciting each Buddha's name.

Answer: I personally feel that the vajrasattva is more powerful. This is because for a practice to be powerful, you need to do it in a way that is as complete as possible. For 35 Buddhas, you must visualize 35 Buddhas. Whereas Vajrasattva, ease of visualization involves only 1 deity. When you do the Vajrasattva practice and you visualize the deity clearly and you memorize the mantra and you visualize light and nectar descend and purify.

But if you have not been given permission, any highest yoga tantra, then you will not be able to do this vajrasattva practice properly. You can't visualize yourself as a deity and so on. For such people, just concentrate on the 35 Buddhas practice. But if you are a tantric practitioner and have permission, recommend vajrasattva for you. This means your practice will be more complete and because you can do it in a more complete manner, it's more powerful for you.

But don't get me wrong – if it's easy, it's more powerful. ☺ NO! if it's complete, it's powerful. If it's easy but you don't do the practice with all the components complete, then it's not powerful. I'm not saying it's easy, it's more powerful.