

English Dharma talk
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A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life (Bodhicaryavatara) – Class 16

By Shantideva

Let's begin today's Dharma talk going to stanza 4 of chapter 1 instead of chapter 3. It says:

[1:4] So hard to find such ease and wealth
Whereby to render meaningful this human birth!
If now I fail to turn it to my profit
How could such a chance be mine again?

In the first half of the stanza, it is stated that the precious human birth is difficult to obtain. If you consider the number of humans on the planet compared to bugs, there aren't many human beings. If you think of human beings with complete faculties and understand Dharma among those human beings, it will be even fewer. This precious human birth we have enables us to wish a good rebirth or long term goals as attaining Buddhahood and enlightenment.

In brief, we have the best of things. What do we want? We all want happiness. What we don't want is suffering. This precious human birth helps us to achieve that happiness. How do we achieve our goals of happiness? Simply by wishing it we can't achieve happiness.

We want happiness. We have to investigate how happiness will come about. What really is happiness? Understanding the causes and conditions of suffering we can eliminate suffering thereby achieve happiness.

In stanza 4 Shantideva says, “...If now I fail to turn it to my profit, how could such a chance be mine again?” The Buddha conveyed a similar message when He turned the first wheel of Dharma. We have to understand suffering as well as what is suffering. We strive hard to find the causes of suffering and happiness.

For example, many of us think if we have more money that we have happiness. So many of us make effort to make more money and get rich. However, that is not the case to be happy. It is more natural to think when you have more money you are not happy rather in constant fear of losing it. Therefore it is very important to understand what the real happiness is.

In the second Noble Truth, the Buddha told that the origin of suffering has to be abandoned. Without giving up the origins of suffering you can't end suffering. What are the origins of suffering? First, karma traces the origin of suffering.

That is, one type of origins of suffering is karma. How does karma come into effect? When you look at the principal form of suffering, it is the view of the transitory collection. It is the distortion of reality. We have "I" or "me". The "I" does not even appear as it is the way we think. We try to achieve happiness for us. Our actions of body, speech, and mind causes karma. For example, in terms of speech, gossiping, slander, etc. causes karma.

Eventhough we want happiness we suffer. We need to counteract. Instead of thinking "I", we need to think about others and think "we" instead. If you are able to benefit others in your actions, then the distance between we and others become less. This is the way we should achieve happiness.

What we are studying in this class is how to practice Bodhisattva deeds to achieve ultimate happiness. When one gradually reduces self preoccupation, Bodhicitta could be generated. This does not happen in an over night. It takes time. This is the subject matter of the text.

For example, before you enter into a war situation you have to study well about the enemy. You have to understand various kinds of enemies. Then study the various methods of warfare to defeat the enemy. Similarly, we have all the negative emotions to conquer. How we overcome these 'enemies'?

How to prepare our minds to generate bodhicitta? Among the deeds of the bodhisattva, act of genorosity is prominent. In stanza 10, Shantideva mentions this importance:

[3:10] For sentient beings, poor and destitute,
May I become a treasure ever plentiful,
And lie before them closely in their reach,
A varied source of all that they might need.

In the practice of genorosity we have this mind that others welfare is imprtnant instead of ours. In stanza 11, Shantideva is ready to give away his own body for the benefit of others:

[3:11] My body, thus, and all my good besides,
And all my merits gained and to be gained,
I give them all away withholding nothing
To bring about the benefit of beings.

In stanza 12, Shantideva encourages us to give in order to obtain Nirvana. He says “Nirvana is the object of my striving.”

[3:12] Nirvana is attained by giving all,
Nirvana the objective of my striving,
Everything therefore must be abandoned,
And it is best to give it all to others.

We want the highest happiness. The highest happiness is Nirvana. We could achieve the highest happiness by practice of giving. Second half of stanza 12 states this as “ Everything therefore must be abandoned, and it is best to give it all to others.”

When we practice giving, the best recipients are the sentient beings as it is stated in stanza 13:

[3:13] This body I have given up
To serve the pleasure of all living beings,
Let them kill and beat and slander it,
And do to it whatever they desire.

It explains that we have control over our body. In this stanza Shantideva expresses this wish of practicing generosity. As if in real life situation the sentient beings were to hit him or criticize he would accept it without any retaliation. The practice describe in the stanza is difficult for us. However, if someone slander, you can easily ignore it with practice.

What follows is an extensive form of generosity as it is in stanza 14.

[3:14] And though they treat it like a toy,
Or make of it the butt of every mockery
My body has been given up to them-
There's no use, now, to make so much of it.

What Shantideva said here is that others may treat his body as a toy. Or they may verbally reck him. When one practices generosity, others can do whatever they want to your body. The first half of stanza 15 further explains this:

[3:15] And so let beings do to me
Whatever does not bring them injury.

.....

They can do whatever they want. For example, if I retaliate, it may harm to those. So I avoid causing harm. The second half of the stanza 15 describes the intended dedication:

[3:15] ...
Whenever they catch sight of me,

Let this not fail to bring them benefit.

Stanza 16 explains how to dedicate one's self for others happiness :

[3:16] If those who see me entertain
A thought of anger or devotion,
May these states supply the cause
Whereby their good and wishes are fulfilled.

The stanza 17 involves dedication of one's body. The previous stanza, it is about dedicating your mind for others so that the thought become not wasted.

[3:17] All those who slight me to my face,
Or do me any other evil,
Even if they blame or slander me,
May they attain the fortune of enlightenment!

Stanza 17 explains what Shantideva's wish is: "if someone criticizes me or abuse me, whether a person behind my back say bad things or become physical, may they have fortune to attain the highest happiness - enlightenment."

The next section has to do with dedication. The first of these stanzas is cause of dedication. This has 3 stanzas:

[3:18] May I be a guard for those who are protectorless,
A guide for those who journey on the road.
For those who wish to go across the water,
May I be a boat, a raft, a bridge.

As in stanza 18, we make the prayer to help them and to protect them. Those who are on a journey can reach their destination with our help. Those who wants to cross the water, you become a ship or a raft or even a bridge.

Next two stanzas further explains this dedication and wish:

[3:19] May I be an isle for those who yearn for landfall,
And a lamp for those who long for light;
For those who need a resting place, a bed;
For all who need a servant, may I be their slave.

[3:20] May I be the wishing jewel, the vase of plenty,
A word of power and the supreme healing;
May I be the tree of miracles,
And for every being the abundant cow.

Of course in the olden days, those who are merchants travel long period of time in the ocean. They desire for a landfall. So I generate an island for them. Those who deprive light, may I become a light for them. Those who need rest may I become a

bed. We make the prayer to achieve the wishes of sentient beings. The word of power and supreme healing. Some of these objects like wish fulfilling jewel did exist.

[3:21] Like the earth and the pervading elements,
Enduring as the sky itself endures,
For boundless multitudes of living beings,
May I be their ground and sustenance.

Here the elements are mentioned earth, fire and air. The body requires the cooperation of these elements. The His Holiness Dalai Lama practices stanza 22 as an uninterrupted dedication:

[3:22] Thus for every thing that lives,
As far as are the limits of the sky,
May I provide their livelihood and nourishment
Until they pass beyond the bonds of suffering.

The next session is generation of Bodhicitta. For new students this prayer may look odd.

In this prayer, when you consider Bodhisattva's training of mind, you may find it is difficult to achieve.

Bodhisattva is one who has a mind of enlightenment. Mind of enlightenment is such that you have to recognize and pay back kindness before you generate mind of Bodhicitta. If you reflect on kindness and think what can I do to repay one's kindness to you.

For example, to reflect on kindness of one's mother. A mother bears a baby for 9-10 months. Just imagine holding a baby for 9 months. During this time of pregnancy the mother has to take so many precautions. There are things she couldn't eat. In the past people were worried about the development of the fetus. Those days they didn't have machines. So anxiety and worry in bearing the child. Also, the anxiety does not end by the birth of the baby. When the baby cries or does not eat, the mother worries. Before the baby can talk, it cries for everything. When the child goes to school, mother still worries thinking whether the kid will study properly or be safe.

Also when the child is in school, whether he passes the exams and get a good certificate. Thereafter their marriage and adult life. So your mother of this life has gone through so many worries and anxieties about you. In our previous lives, we had many many mothers. Perhaps every sentient being might have been your mother has shown kindness. So the prayers are not impossible. These are based on kindness to all sentient beings.

Since we are taking Mahayana Precepts tomorrow on solar eclipse, we'll stop the class here.

Q. When you went over about our mothers, what if it isn't true? What if you have a mother who is really bad? How can you show kindness?

A. Some of the practices described here has to be approached in a gradual manner. Are there mothers who are one hundred per cent bad? If so, the child might have not even born. For example. When a woman is pregnant, she might have an abortion and have the fetus removed. A woman who goes through full time pregnancy can't be totally bad. After the child is born, the child cannot walk or talk. If no one to care for the child he or she may get into accidents hurting his head or injure his body. The fact that now we have a whole face and hands and other body parts means we were taken care of. So this is one sign that the mother is not one hundred per cent bad.

I believe that when we are small we have great affection for our mothers. When we become teenagers, we have conflicts against our mothers. Up to the phase of 6 or 7 years, we love our mothers. After that, things start to change. I think we have to give ourselves some time to appreciate our mothers.

So you have to be very gentle about these contemplations to appreciate the kindness of our mothers. If you are able to do it in a gradual manner, you will be able to focus on kindness towards your mother and gradually increase it to all sentient beings.