

English Dharma talk
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A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life (Bodhicaryavatara) – Class 17
By Shantideva

Let's adjust our motivation. Good to remind ourselves of importance of a good motivation. b/c if we don't remind ourselves from time to time, we might forget the importance of setting a good motivation. Important for both teacher and students to have a good motivation for whatever they do. Particularly here, when they are participating in a Dharma teaching. Crucial for us not to have a corrupt motivation, wanting to engage in this activity thinking I want to become famous, receive gain and honour and reputation and so on. We should set a motivation wanting to benefit all beings as much as possible. In Three Principal Aspects of the Path, he says in the beginning,

As far as I am able, I shall explain
The essence of all the high teachings of the
Victors, the path that all their holy sons commend,
The entry point for the fortunate seeking freedom.

In this stanza, Lama Tsongkhapa is saying he's going to try his best to explain the teachings of the Buddha, the essence of all the teachings of the Conqueror Buddha. Such a path is praised by Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. On top of this, this path serves as an entrance for the fortunate ones seeking liberation. So we not just obtain temporal happiness, but ultimate liberation. So bearing in mind these points, generate the motivation wanting to bring about as much benefit as possible through participating in this activity.

In the next stanza, he says

Listen with a pure mind, fortunate ones who have no craving
For the pleasures of life, and who to make leisure and fortune meaningful,
Strive to turn their minds to the path which pleases the Victors.

Students should not listen with a motivation just to gain something this life. If their motivation is just for this life, the activity will not become pure Dharma. It's possible that some of you are thinking I want to engage in this Dharma activity so I have a good rebirth in my next life. By discarding negativities, purifying obscurations, I want to have a precious human rebirth. If motivation is just for taking good rebirth, this kind of motivation is quite limited. The best kind of motivation is a very vast motivation. I want to engage in this activity to benefit all living beings. You are thinking I'm not the only one with problems. All infinite beings have problems. They have sufferings just as I do.

So I will participate in this activity so I can benefit all living beings. If you have this kind of a wish, your action will please the Buddhas. As mentioned here, you will enter this path that is pleasing the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Try to generate this altruistic motivation, thinking I will benefit all living beings through this activity. In that way, listen to the Dharma. Ensure you have a clear mind, not lethargy / laxity.

There is this tradition of reciting a stanza proclaiming that I will teach the Dharma in the languages of all the beings, including the Nagas, various types of non-humans and so on. Although this recitation is not only done in our classes, we can think we are surrounded by all living beings. All sentient beings take aspect of human beings and they are present here in the teachings. When teacher explains, all these beings can hear the teachings. The students can reflect on their precious human rebirth. You can think: this time, I have received precious human rebirth with 8 freedoms and 10 privileges. How wonderful this is. You think about other living beings. Generate compassion for them. Wish the best for them. Imagine they are surrounded by all beings. Imagine your mother and father are here and they are surrounded by all living beings. Think they all take aspect of human beings and participating here. If you think like that, there's greater benefit of you attending this teaching. Every time, you can do this visualization. You will derive great benefit.

Let us recall what we started in Chapter 2. There is this explanation of the 7 limb practices that began from Chapter 2. If you recall from Chapter 2, we made offerings, prostrations, refuge, and then the practice of confession. Confessing negativities by means of 4 powers. The remaining 4 limbs explained in Chapter 3. Rejoicing in virtue, requesting to turn wheel of Dharma, not to pass into Nirvana. Having completed all 7 limbs, we are going to look at actual part of the commitment to the mind of enlightenment.

Actual path involves taking Bodhisattva vows. Some of you may do it from time to time. Before you actually take them, you should do the 7 limb practice. As I mentioned, you start with making offerings, making prostrations, confession and so on. After you've completed the 7 limbs, you enter the actual rite of taking the Bodhisattva vows. There are many forms of the 7 limb practice. Some of these procedures are very extensive. Some are very brief. Depending on how much time you have, you can select a practice that is suitable for you. Depending on what is available to you, you can do the 7 limb practice accordingly and then go on to take the Bodhisattva vows.

e.g. 8 Mahayana Precepts. The procedure in Chinese is longer. Chinese procedure has 8 stanzas whereas English has only 4 lines. So regardless of which version of the prayer you use, the meaning is the same. What is important is you reflect on the meaning of the 7 limbs.

We finished Chapter 2. Then how to train the mind that gives: body, material wealth, virtue. This brings us to the actual section in the text that discusses the commitment that is the actual upholding of the mind of enlightenment. 2 stanzas. 23 and 24.

23

Just as all the Buddhas of the past
Embraced the awakened attitude of mind,
And in the precepts of the Bodhisattvas
Step by step abode and trained,

24

Just so, and for the benefit of beings,
I will also have this attitude of mind,
And in those precepts, step by step,
I will abide and train myself.

23: We see examples we should emulate. 24: we express wish to train in those same way the past Buddhas have trained.

23: Buddhas of the past embraced the awakened attitude of mind. They train in the precepts of the Bodhisattvas. Step by step abode (past tense of abide). In order to benefit sentient beings.

24: likewise, I will generate mind of enlightenment. I shall also abide in precepts and train in them gradually.

If you will take the Bodhisattva vows here, you need to imagine where you are, the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas of the 10 directions are there. And then do 7 limb practice. Prostrate, offer, confession, rejoice and so on. If there is a teacher present, then you can think your teacher is in the centre and he's surrounded by Buddhas and Bodhisattvas of the 10 directions and do the 7 limb. After that, is the taking of the Bodhisattva Vows. Repeat these stanzas (23 & 24) 3 times. If there's a teacher, you repeat. If not, you imagine the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are abiding in space before you and you can take them in the same way.

While you take the vows, you can also imagine you are surrounded by all living beings. In their presence, you have taken the vows for their benefit.

Stanza 24: second half – in those precepts, step by step, I will abide and train myself. Step by step or gradually. Progressively. These words are significant. b/c they talk about how you should train in the deeds of the Bodhisattvas. It's said when Bodhisattvas train in these precepts, at the beginning, they simply imagine they do them. Gradually, they increase capacity. Eventually they do the deeds. So similarly, we need to train in that way. So e.g. we begin by hearing explanations of these precepts. We reflect on how they should be practiced. We organize them in our mind. Gradually, we will be able to put them into practice. Eventually, we will do those deeds. This takes place in a step by step manner.

This means when we learn about their deeds, we shouldn't be overly ambitious. We shouldn't think we will do these right now! If one is not well trained enough, there's a

danger one becomes frustrated and disappointed. And as a result, the hindrances that one face one gives up one's bodhicitta. One can face huge obstacles. We have to train step by step. Starting from the smallest steps and not just jump into these huge practices immediately. In this commentary, he says practices like the generosity of giving away one's body should not be done with an impure mind. Else, one will incur fault.

The commentator says do it when one doesn't incur fault. It should be a great accumulation of merit.

Having made this commitment, next section: cultivate joy. One is rejoicing at one's courage. One's uplifting one's mind by self-encouragement. In a way, praising oneself so one's mind is endowed with power and strength.

One cultivates joy in one's own mind, thinking about how one has accomplished one's welfare. The first section involves uplifting one's mind through the reflection of 2 stanzas. 25 and 26.

25

That this most pure and spotless state of mind
Might be embraced and constantly increase,
The prudent who have cultivated it
Should praise it highly in such words as these:

26

“Today my life has given fruit.
This human state has now been well assumed.
Today I take my birth in Buddha's line,
And have become the Buddhas' child and heir.

25: says the prudent have cultivated. The prudent of the wise ones, the intelligent ones are the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. They have cultivated the mind of enlightenment. I will do the same. So this mind of enlightenment might be embraced and constantly increased. To do that, this mind (taking of Bodhisattva vows) should be praised highly. One generates enthusiasm for taking and increasing bodhicitta.

26: one actually uplifts one's mind by saying today my life has given fruit. My life has become really meaningful. I've taken precious human rebirth with 8 freedoms and 10 privileges. I made it very meaningful. My goal is to generate bodhicitta, which all Buddhas and Bodhisattvas of the three times have. I've waited a long time to generate this, and today I've done it, so it's meaningful. Today I become a special being. The Buddhas look upon me and say this is my child. So one generates light and enthusiasm for this practice.

27: cultivating conscientiousness. This is b/c not just enough to generate bodhicitta. If we fail to sustain this mind with mindfulness and introspection, there's danger this mind

will be lost. Here, we tell ourselves we need to be conscientious after generating bodhicitta.

27

“In every way, then, I will undertake
Activities befitting such a rank.
And I will do no act to mar
Or compromise this high and faultless lineage.

We express our wish to be conscientious about practicing the Bodhisattva path. We are embarking on this path that all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas of the 3 times traverse. We are on the same path. Such a path is a faultless path. I will do nothing to contaminate this path. This lineage of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas is high and faultless because it only has good qualities. It has no faults. So now I’m traveling this same path, I’m going to ensure I only do actions that are concordant with this pure lineage. I will not do anything flawed to pollute this lineage.

28 we rejoice b/c we have found such a rare mind. There are billions of humans in the world and there are other forms of life: animals and other kinds of life. So you think: among all these living beings, I have found this very rare mind. I have found this precious bodhicitta. Based on this reflection you should cultivate joy from the bottom of your heart.

28

“For I am like a blind man who has found
A precious gem within a mound of filth.
Exactly so, as if by some strange chance,
The enlightened mind has come to birth in me”.

First half of this stanza: this example of a blind man who finds a precious gem within a mound of filth. Imagine a poor blind man who is looking for food and drink and then in a heap of garbage, he finds a precious stone such as a diamond. If he realizes that, you can imagine how much joy he would feel. He would understand: I will never have to go hungry again. He will be overjoyed. Similar to this example, we should reflect on the fact: so many living beings. So many animals and so on. There are humans as well. among humans there are few with a precious human rebirth. Among those, how many are interested in the Dharma. Among these, how many generate bodhicitta? You should recognize the opportunity you have is so rare. Now by some chance I have generated the mind of enlightenment, realizing this fortune, rejoice from the bottom of your heart!

This mind of enlightenment brings about many benefits. 29: first two lines discusses this mind of enlightenment can destroy the Lord of death.

29

“This is the draft of immortality,
That slays the Lord of Death, the slaughterer of beings,

Among the various types of sufferings, that of death is the most intense. Other forms of suffering such as birth, aging, sickness and so on are very unpleasant. They cause us worry. They make us very miserable, but none is as intense as that of death. Here, it's stated there's no better nectar or ambrosia for curing this suffering of death. This mind of enlightenment is able to kill the Lord of Death. This is the best method for destroying that.

This stanza is not saying if you generate bodhicitta, then you don't die. Rather, it says if you have bodhicitta, then you will not have to suffer at death. Anyone has to die. If you have bodhicitta, you won't have to experience the suffering of death that people usually suffer from. His Holiness the Dalai Lama has mentioned this often. He often quotes this stanza from chapter 10:

As space endures,
As long as there are beings to be found,
May I continue likewise to remain
To drive away the sorrows of the world.

He says if at the time of death, you can remember this stanza, remind self of aspiration, then no way to experience suffering at the time of death. For this reason, bodhicitta is the supreme nectar to destroy the Lord of Death.

2nd half: bodhicitta destroys poverty.

29

...

The rich unfailing treasure-mind
To heal the poverty of wanderers.

If we see migrators in need, then what's the best treasure that can eliminate their poverty? It is actually the mind of enlightenment. This bodhicitta is able to give what is needed that is inexhaustible.

Next 2 lines say it drives away sickness.

31

"It is the universal vehicle that saves
All wandering beings from the states of loss –

If we see sentient beings tormented by sickness, we can think: to dispel the diseases, the best medicine is the mind of enlightenment.

Why do we say bodhicitta destroys sickness? This is powerful altruistic mind. If we see sick people, through force of bodhicitta, we will do whatever it takes to relieve them of their suffering. We may use our money to buy medicine so they recover. In the more

figurative way, when you talk about sick sentient beings, they are suffering from sickness of aging, sickness, and so on. To dispel the root of their suffering, they need to practice Dharma. Out of altruism, we want to completely uproot their sickness.

Scientists have confirmed that having a happy relaxed mind is good for health. Good for the wellbeing of the elements in the body. If we have a happy relaxed mind, then elements within body will be balanced. This harmonious state will prevent us from falling sick easily. Even if we fall sick, we will recover quickly. This is something the scientists have verified. Conversely, if we have very strong self-grasping, strong egoistic tendencies, then it's natural we become very anxious, stressed easily, and this causes the elements within the body to be upset. And not be able to abide in the state of balance. We fall sick easily. Harder for us to recover. If we want to have a healthy body and long life, then it's good for us to cultivate altruism.

B/c we have not experienced this bodhicitta before, we have not generated it in our continuum, we may find these explanations too good to be true. I can't even solve my own problems. Taking on other's problems, how is this conceivable? We should examine the basis of our suffering. When we have very strong self-grasping, you can observe you become stressed and nervous. Your afflictions become strong: attachment, anger, etc. You become agitated. If you turn your mind outwards and be more considerate of others, concerned of others, your mind becomes spacious and relaxed. This is something we can experience for ourselves.

Let's say someone says something nasty to you. In the first scenario, your mind is relaxed. You are considerate of others. You care about others. This incident will not affect you much. You will be able to look at this person with equanimity and remain quiet. In the second scenario, strong self-grasping. As soon as you hear nasty words about you, you get upset. You want to say something to retaliate and you can quickly get into a fight with this person. It really depends on how strong your self-grasping mind is. If you are very considerate of others, care about them, you won't be so nervous, anxious, aggressive when someone attacks you. You will see with equanimity and think no problem. This person makes a mistake but so what, I make mistakes myself. You remain calm. It's really a matter of how you conduct your mind.

Next 2 lines: it destroys suffering of samsara in general

30

...

“It is the wishing tree bestowing rest
On those who wander wearily the pathways of existence”.

These say normally we wander in samsara without having an opportunity to rest. Through force of karma, we drift into birth, aging, sickness and death. No matter how much we want to take a break from these, but once we generate bodhicitta, then we can take a break. There's a wishing tree that gives rest to those who wander wearily. Imagine you walk in the hot sun and finally you see tree with shade. Imagine how

blissfully it would be. Generating bodhicitta is like that. It's like a tree that bestows rest on us for those who have wandered without break in samsara.

Next 2 lines: bodhicitta destroys the suffering of the lower realms. We want to be free from suffering, especially that of lower rebirth. Best way to do so is bodhicitta. First half:

31

It is the universal vehicle that saves
All wandering beings from the states of loss –

These 2 lines liken this bodhicitta to a bridge. The Tibetan says a bridge you can cross to reach another shore. The suffering of the lower realms are hard to bear. Bodhicitta gives a bridge to transcend these sufferings. In Lama Chopa (Guru Puja), in this request prayer in relation to the perfection of joyous effort, stanza 104:

Even if we must remain for an ocean of eons in the fiery
Hells of Avici for the sake of one sentient being,
We seek your blessings to complete the perfection of joyous effort
To strive with compassion for Supreme Enlightenment and not be discouraged.

This is what bodhicitta enables us to do. With this mind of enlightenment, with hells, and eons, ...

Here, we do not say bodhicitta can immediately make all these sufferings vanish. Rather, we say through the force of bodhicitta, power of bodhicitta, these sufferings become unnoticeable. This is said in Lama Chopa, stanza 96:

Should even the environment and the beings therein be filled with the fruits of their
karmic debts
And unwished for sufferings pour down like rain,
We seek your blessings to take these miserable conditions as a path
By seeing them as causes to exhaust the results of our negative karma.

It doesn't say you don't have to die. It says bodhicitta is so powerful ...

Here, next 2 lines of 31: explains bodhicitta can eliminate afflictive obscurations. If you want to liberate self from samsara, you need to eliminate afflictive obscurations. Even if that's your goal to liberate self from samsara by abandoning afflictive obscurations, bodhicitta is the best method.

31

...
...

The rising moon of the enlightened mind
That soothes the sorrows born of the afflictions.

These lines explain Bodhicitta is a moon that causes this coolness. If you are in a place that's very hot in the day. Then when the moon appears in the evening, then there's a certain coolness in the air. Bodhicitta eliminates the heat of torment of afflictions. It gives sentient beings a certain coolness, relief from afflictive obscurations.

Next: explains: bodhicitta is the supreme method for eliminating the obscurations to knowledge. first 2 lines of 32:

32

“It is a mighty sun that utterly dispels
The gloom and ignorance of wandering beings,”

Here, bodhicitta is like this great sun that is able to dispel all darkness. No matter how powerful our electric lights are, they can't dispel all darkness in the way the sun can dispel darkness. Bodhicitta is likened to this great sun. It can eliminate obscurations to knowledge. The Hinayana Practitioners realize emptiness but can't attain full enlightenment b/c they lack the mind of enlightenment. For that reason, the mind of enlightenment is said to eliminate obscurations to knowledge.

Next: 2 lines: explain bodhicitta achieves all benefit. Second half of 32

The creamy butter, rich and full,
All churned from milk of holy Teaching.

So the Buddha is said to have given 84,000 heaps of teachings. If you have a wish to know of these teachings, then you need to perhaps turn to the translated scriptures: the Kangyur (Kanjur) has > 100 volumes; Tengyur (Tanjur) has > 200 volumes. The essence of the teachings is in the cultivation of bodhicitta. If you have an ocean of milk and want to derive essence of milk, then you churn it and get butter. If you want essence of Buddha's teachings, you cultivate bodhicitta. Then you can take the essence. For this reason, it's said Bodhicitta is best way to achieve enlightenment.

33

“Living beings! Wayfarers upon life's paths,
Who wish to taste the riches of contentment,”

Living beings wander in samsara. They have this wish to taste happiness. The riches of contentment. How can we satisfy their wishes? Bodhicitta is the best way to fulfill this.

So in brief, if you want to have a happy, relaxed life, meditate on bodhicitta. If you want a human rebirth, meditate on bodhicitta. If you want liberation from samsara; meditate on bodhicitta. If you want health, long life, or achieve your goals, meditate on bodhicitta. If you want to enact the welfare of others, also meditate on bodhicitta.

33 second half

“Here before you is the supreme bliss –
Here, O ceaseless wanderers, is your fulfillment!”

34:

We cause others to rejoice

“And so, within the sight of all protectors,
I summon every being, calling them to Buddhahood –
And till that state is reached, to every earthly joy!
May gods and demigods, and all the rest, rejoice!”

Before, we made this commitment of bodhicitta in the presence of all Buddhas. Here, I invite all living beings to be guests, regardless who they are. If they give harm or benefit. I summon all of them to this place. Wish they are able to abide in benefit and happiness.

In Gyaltshab Je’s (One of Lama Tsongkhapa’s prodigal sons) commentary, he says that preceding the generation of the 2 minds of enlightenment, you should know you have to first purify the unfavourable conditions and have to accumulate favourable conditions. That is the supreme way to take the essence of the supreme human rebirth endowed with freedoms and privileges. Prior to generating bodhicitta, one should engage in 7 limbs so one purifies misdeeds and obscurations and accumulate merit. In reality, the 2 practices are not separate. Purification and accumulating merit are not separate. But knowing the formal presentation, among the 7 limbs, the first 3 are for purifying the unfavourable conditions. I.e. prostrate, offer, confess are for removing unfavourable conditions. Remainder 4: rejoice, request turn Dharma wheel, urge Buddhas not to pass away, and dedication for sake of accumulating favourable condition. That’s the basis for taking vows. If you can bear in mind these essential practices, then that’s actually a very effective way of engaging in the Dharma. If you can do that, then that’s a supreme way for you to make your precious human rebirth meaningful.

He says:

The intelligent will obtain a human body of freedoms and privileges should make effort in generating the two bodhicittas

The essential meaning of all the Conqueror’s teachings

The sole path traversed by the 10 million children of the Victors

First line: we should know between good and bad

Second line: it’s this creamy butter- the essence of the teachings and sole path ...

So we should make effort to generate bodhicitta.

We should generate wish that bodhicitta has not been generated be generated, and that been generated be increased forever more.