

English Dharma talk
August 12, 2017
By Geshe Pema Tshering
Land of Compassion Buddha Edmonton
<http://compassionbuddha.ca>

A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life (Bodhicaryavatara) – Class 15

By Shantideva

Reflecting on stanza from chapter 7 in Shantideva's Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life

Stanza 19 of this chapter: heroic perseverance

Able to distinguish good from ill
If I by birth and lineage of human kind devote myself to Bodhisattva training
Why should I not gain the state of Buddhahood?

One of the most important conditions for full enlightenment is the basis for practice. The best support we can get is that of a human rebirth. In this stanza it's said by birth and lineage of human rebirth, I can devote myself to the training. We've attained such a precious human rebirth.

Some although born as humans are handicapped in certain ways, e.g. defective sense faculties; mentally unable to distinguish between good and bad. We are not like that. We are endowed with intelligent minds and can differentiate between good and bad.

Stanza 19: if I devote myself to Bodhisattva training why should I not gain Buddhahood? We can distinguish between good and bad. We can understand if we do certain actions, I create cause for enlightenment. If we do certain other actions, I will not become enlightened. With this understanding, if we fail to put our intelligence to good use, then we'll suffer a loss. If I have this human rebirth and devote myself to Bodhisattva training, then there's no reason I won't reach full enlightenment.

If we want to attain enlightenment, we need to create its causes. We need to train in the Bodhisattva Deeds. We can deduce similarly, to obtain Hinayana enlightenment (self liberation), we also need to train in corresponding causes. Similarly, if we want to obtain higher rebirth of a human / god, we need to create the corresponding causes. If we create causes and train ourselves in various requirements, then it's not difficult for us to obtain our goal.

Whether we want to obtain highest enlightenment of Buddhahood or lower goal of individual liberation, we need to create corresponding causes. We are in very good position because we are born as human being. In order to create causes for liberation, we need a good rebirth. We have the best one: a human. Whether or not our goal is easy to

attain depends on whether we create the causes. Chandrakirti in Supplement to the Middle Way: the indispensable cause for good rebirth is practice of ethics.

So as Chandrakirti says, we need to practice ethics if we want to obtain a good rebirth, which is the basis for attaining liberation and enlightenment. Among various ethics disciplines we can practice, the most essential is that of giving up the 10 nonvirtues. Some of us may feel the Dharma is very vast. It's hard for us to practice. But if you look at this practice of giving up the 10 nonvirtues you can see it's quite concrete and manageable. It is easy for us to understand what the 10 nonvirtues are and what it means to give them up. We can enumerate them and can understand if we indulge in the 10 nonvirtues we are creating trouble for ourselves. If we give them up, we become better people. From that point of view, we modify our behaviour accordingly following ethical discipline guidelines. If we practice ethics, no reason why we can't attain a good rebirth.

What we can do on a daily basis is in morning, we can generate a determination to avoid the 10 nonvirtues for the entire day. We make this commitment I will not have anything to do with the 10 nonvirtues. During the day we act as carefully as we can so as to not be tainted by them. At the end of the day, before we go to bed, we can reflect on what happened during the day and if we find we created some of the 10 nonvirtues, we should confess and purify. Recite prayers to purify misdeeds we created. In that way, we should conduct ourselves and practice ethics.

Practice of ethical disciplines is very important. Regardless whether you are practicing sutra / tantra or call yourself Hinayana / Mahayana, you need to have a good rebirth in order to accomplish virtue in an efficient manner. If you can obtain good rebirth after another good rebirth, then without interruption, you will be in a good place to create causes for enlightenment. If you have a string of good rebirths, then it's a matter of time you'll meet these superior beings (Aryas) who can guide you on spiritual path. Although you don't practice fervently, you'll be able to meet someone who can guide you on the path. By meeting such opportunity, you will make huge progress on path. However, if you fail to practice ethics and not practice much, and fail to observe ethics, then danger of falling into lower rebirth is very great. Once fall into lower rebirth, stay very long time. Hard to liberate oneself from lower rebirth. In lower realms, the conditions for practicing virtue are very difficult. So this means if one falls into lower rebirth, then again and again, one will take a lower rebirth. For that reason, very important for us to practice ethics. The most essential is to give up the 10 nonvirtues.

Indian master Vasubandhu in Treasury of Knowledge says: even a meditator has to pay attention to ethics. If you are interested in cultivating concentration, subdue mind and focus mind well, you need to first tame your body and speech. In other words, you need to be able to avoid misbehavior of body and speech. On the basis of having subdued your body and speech that you are able to subdue your mind, which is subtle. It is essential to practice ethics. Ethics is the practice of ... by practice ethics, one tames one's body and speech; then one's mind in concentration. First practice ethical discipline; then study. Hear teachings; on that basis, meditate.

Let's turn our attention to chapter 3 of our text. In this chapter, we look at some limbs from among the 7 limbs. If you recall, we have gone through the limb of prostration, of making offerings, and of confession. In this chapter 3, we examine the remaining limbs: rejoicing in virtue; urging the Buddhas to turn the wheel of Dharma; request them not to enter Nirvana; and dedication.

We need to understand what are the 7 limbs for? They are limbs of the accumulation of virtue and purifying of obscurations.

The significance of this word "limb" is that if we do a practice that involves accumulating merit or purifying misdeeds, such an act will be included within the 7 limbs. E.g. if we say I'm sick, then definitely this is traced to a part of us. Maybe I have a headache etc. This sickness can't be traced to outside my parts. Similarly, when we engage in purifying and accumulating merit, it must be included in the 7 limbs.

We have completed the first 3 of the 7 limbs. E.g. limb of prostration, it's been explained we pay homage with body, speech and mind. When we offer in the 2nd limb, we make unsurpassed offerings and surpassable offerings. 3rd limb, confession, explained we should engage in confession by way of the complete 4 opponent powers. This practice of confession has been explained several times. I think you understand what the first 3 limbs are.

Let's look at 4th limb: rejoicing. There are 3 types of rejoicing explained here: first, rejoice in the causes and effects of good rebirths; 2nd: rejoicing in virtue of causes and effects of mere liberation; 3rd: rejoicing in causes and effects of unsurpassed enlightenment.

3.1

Explains rejoicing of causes and effects of good rebirths

With joy I celebrate
The virtue that relieves all beings
From the sorrows of the states of loss,
And places those who languish in the realms of bliss.

In this stanza we are rejoicing in the virtue that causes good rebirths. We are rejoicing e.g. in the practice of ethical discipline. As explained earlier, practice of ethical discipline is main cause for taking good rebirth. If rejoice in abandoning 10 nonvirtues, besides the practice of ethical discipline, there can be other causes of good rebirth. E.g. prostrations to 3 jewels and dedicate that to good rebirth: thinking by my prostrations, may I get a good rebirth. By motivation, that can be cause for good rebirth. So by such causes, we can gain good rebirth.

For those of us exposed to the ideas of the possibility of obtaining liberation from samsara and full enlightenment of Buddhahood, if we witness someone making the prayers to attain a good human rebirth through the practice of prostrations and so on, we

might look down on this person and think he's aiming for a low goal when there's a higher goal of highest enlightenment. We might despise him. We should NOT do that, because virtue for human rebirth is worth rejoicing in.

Why is it that even the virtue of creating a good rebirth should be rejoiced in? Why rejoice in others' virtues? As explained in this stanza 3.1, that kind of virtue then prevents the suffering of lower realms. If one falls into lower rebirth, one will undergo intense suffering for long time. It's worthy to avoid that kind of suffering! It's worthy to avoid lower rebirth! If one makes virtue to protect one from that kind of suffering, we should rejoice this merit is created to avoid suffering of lower realms!

Next stanza:

3.2

And I rejoice in virtue that creates the cause
Of gaining the enlightened state,
And celebrate the freedom won
By living beings from the round of pain.

If someone creates cause for Hinayana enlightenment, we can rejoice in those activities: hearing, contemplation, meditation to liberate self from samsara, we can rejoice in that virtue.

Why is it that we should rejoice in the virtues created for sake of attaining liberation? 2nd half of stanza 2:

And celebrate the freedom won
By living beings from the round of pain.

Round of pain = samsara. Sufferings we encounter are result of us in samsara. Drawbacks of samsara: you have to experience various forms of suffering. If one creates cause to be free from cyclic existence, this is very worthy to rejoice in! If someone creates cause for liberation, we should rejoice.

In the sutra system, it's taught we should rejoice in the virtues of everyone, including those who are Hinayana practitioners. In the Tantra system, we should also not look down upon Hinayana practitioners. In fact, if one were to despise the practice of Hinayana practitioners, one creates a tantric root downfall. There are many Hinayana practitioners around the world, e.g. Theravada Buddhism. We should never say Hinayana is inferior. We should avoid looking down on others who do not practice Mahayana / Tantra.

Having discussed the rejoicing virtue of causes and effects of mere liberation, we move to next section: 6 lines: rejoice in cause and effects of unsurpassed enlightenment. First, we have 3 lines that rejoice in the causes and effects of Buddhahood; then another 3 that explain rejoice in virtues of Bodhisattvas who are ordinary beings.

1.5 stanzas: 3.3 to 3.4

3.3

And in the buddhahood of the protectors I delight
And in the stages of the buddha's offspring.

3.4

The intention, ocean of great good,
That seeks to place all beings in the state of bliss,
And every action for the benefit of all:
Such is my delight and all my joy.

3.3: we see the rejoicing in Buddhahood and causes of Buddhahood. We have stages of Buddha's offspring. What this refers to is virtue of the Bodhisattvas who have attained the 10 grounds / bhumis. They practice generosity, ethical discipline, patience and so forth in order to benefit living beings. Their practice of these 6 perfections is outstanding. First ground Bodhisattva has surpassing practice of generosity: give all body, resources to help sentient beings. Second ground: surpassing practice of ethical discipline: give up lives to practice pure ethics.

If we want to explain this in great detail we can go on to talk about the perfections one by one. E.g. perfection of patience: when Bodhisattva reaches 3rd ground; has surpassing practice of patience. As said in Lama Chopa (Guru Puja), even if beings were able to scold me, humiliate me, I seek your blessings in order to complete practice of patience, to not be distraught and to work for benefit of living beings.

The 6 perfections are actualized by the Bodhisattvas. They are not just contemplating these practices. They are actually putting them into practice. Encountering sentient beings and actually engaging in generosity, ethics, patience and so on, in order to enact their welfare.

Here, in stanza 3, we talk about Bodhisattvas who walk their talk; they do what they say they will do.

3.4 here we have the rejoicing of virtues of Bodhisattvas who are not at that level yet. They are on path of accumulation and preparation. Not attained any grounds yet. Even though they don't have the capacity to practice the 6 perfections in fullest manner, they have very strong sincere intention to engage in those practices.

In Lama Chopa, there is this prayer to be able to practice generosity in the fullest manner. Before one can actually practice generosity in that way, one must train in that thought. Bodhisattva say: I want to transform my body, wealth, and collections of virtues into the objects desired by each sentient being as said in Lama Chopa. So I seek your blessings to practice this perfection. To train in these attitudes, Bodhisattva can actualize the giving of body, wealth and so on.

It is significant for us to understand that the mental training should precede the actual giving. This is because as beginners, we are not necessarily in the best position to give away everything physically we have. If we fail to properly train our minds and imagine giving before we give, then we might run into trouble. We hear explanations of how beneficial it is to be generous, so we think we want to think away everything. You give away everything and then the recipient has a very negative attitude / not grateful and so on, you might regret giving. Or you give everything and you have financial trouble, then you might generate regret I shouldn't have given those things. If you have this kind of remorse, then you waste your efforts trying to give. Therefore, important for us to train mentally before we physically give. b/c if we fail to do that, we might run into trouble. So huge danger.

e.g. in my home country such incidents have happened. People give. Someone gives to a beggar and then after 1 or 2 hours, the person sees the beggar drunk. If a person were to see this, naturally this person would feel bad for having given this beggar money which ended up being spent on alcohol. So if the mind then becomes negative, then the generosity was wasted. This person then generates mind of miserliness. Great nonvirtue. The previous virtue was erased and on top of that, nonvirtue was created. So this illustrates the fact it's important for us to give when we are mentally ready. We should cultivate mind of giving that's so strong we won't generate regret. If our mind is not so strong, then there's danger we will suffer loss twice. Once by erasing the virtue of generosity and second, by creating the nonvirtue of miserliness.

Practice of rejoicing is very important. Lama Tsongkhapa: best practice for accumulating lots of virtue with little hardship is rejoicing. One can create a huge amount of merit.

Let's say you know about somebody practicing generosity, giving away huge amounts of money for example. You can rejoice this person has created something wonderful. If you sincerely rejoice, then you create merit. If you are not able to create as much merit as this person, then you can create half the amount of merit created by this person. If not, 30%, 40%. So easily you create virtue.

Through such rejoicing, you create a lot of merit without much effort: not had to give away physically. Not undergo hardship. So rejoice is one of best ways of creating merit.

It's said if the person practicing generosity has fewer good qualities than you, when you rejoice in that person's virtue, you create more merit than they do. If they are of the same level as you in terms of good qualities, then you get an equal amount when you rejoice in their merit. If they are more advanced in their practice, has more qualities than you, and you rejoice in their virtues, then you get half of the amount of merit.

Stanza 3.5

5th of 7 limbs: urging Buddhas to turn wheel of Dharma

And so I join my hands and pray
The buddhas who reside in every quarter:
Kindle now the Dharma's light
For those who grope, bewildered, in the dark of suffering!

We beseech Buddhas to abide in 10 directions to turn wheel of Dharma. 10 directions; the 4 cardinal directions plus 4 intermediate directions plus above and below. We are praying to all Buddhas who reside in every direction. What do we request them? Shine lamp of Dharma. There are these beings bewildered in dark of suffering. To dispel suffering, we request them to kindle Dharma's light.

The purpose of such a request is so the Buddhas will teach the Dharma. It's not always the case that Buddhas teach the Dharma. E.g. after Buddha Shakyamuni became enlightened, for 49 days, he remained silent. Here, we request Buddhas to always turn Wheel of Dharma.

Next (3.6) explains the 6th limb: request Buddhas to not pass into nirvana.

3.6
I join my hands, beseeching the enlightened ones
Who wish to pass beyond the bonds of sorrow:
Do not leave us in our ignorance;
Remain among us for unnumbered ages!

We request Buddhas to not leave us in our ignorance. b/c of ignorance, we suffer from blindness of ignorance, so we are deprived of intelligence. We beseech Buddhas not to pass away into nirvana. We ask them to remain among us to dispel our ignorance.

We move to 7th limb: dedication of virtues. Various types of dedication here; to sick; to alleviate hunger, thirst and so on.

3.7
And through these actions now performed,
By all the virtue I have just amassed,
May all the pain of every living being
Be wholly scattered and destroyed!

Stanza 7 is the general dedication: through these actions now performed, offerings, rejoicing, requesting Buddha not to pass into nirvana and so on, by these virtues, may all the pain of every living being be dispelled. I.e. through roots of these virtues.

Do you know the difference between making prayers and making a dedication?
Difference lies in whether or not there is substance for dedication.

Let's take this e.g. of 3.7. We say through these actions now performed, by all the virtue I have just amassed – by 1st limb through to the 7th limb, prostration and so on, may all

sufferings of sentient beings be dispelled. We have a dedicating substance b/c that substance is the virtue we have created from the first 6 limbs. This is both a dedication and a prayer.

In contrast, if we have not created any virtue in particular that we are dedicating and we are simply wishing may all sentient beings be dispelled, this is just a prayer. But not a dedication b/c there's nothing to dedicate.

If you find this confusing, let me give an example.

Let's say you are hungry and you think may I be able to find food. If you just wish like that, that's just a prayer. Or wallet empty, wish may I find food. Just prayer; not dedication.

If instead you have money and think I'm going to use this money to buy a meal in restaurant, this is dedicating money to the meal that will alleviate your hunger. Both dedication and prayer.

Therefore, if you do not have dedication substance and think may I attain Buddhahood, that's just prayer. However, if you've created some virtue and using that as substance of dedication and think by this virtue, may I become a Buddha, then that's a prayer and dedication.

3.8

Dedication to dispel sickness

For all those ailing in the world,
Until their every sickness has been healed,
May I myself become for them
The doctor, the nurse, the medicine itself.

We are really just making a prayer. Not a dedication b/c we are not being able to be doctors in this time. We pray may I become a doctor. We can try to be some kind of semblance of but we are not.

The practice of taking care of the sick is a very important practice. E.g. the Vinaya teachings of the Buddha (discipline), Buddha emphasized care of those who are sick. This is very beneficial to do.

While we may not be actual doctors and nurses now, it's beneficial for us to generate such aspirations – may I become doctors and nurses for sick; it's beneficial for us to think about and creates vast virtues.

These stories of Kadampa Masters caring for people who are sick. In Olden Tibet, people who suffer from leprosy. They are expelled from the villages. These poor people

are ostracized by others. Kadampa Masters would especially reach out to them and act as their nurses.

Vasubandhu explained if one were to offer service to an Arya (superior being who realized reality), huge amount of merit will be created. If you are able to offer service to mother / father / someone who's sick, you create infinite merit.

Stanza 9: dedication to alleviate hunger and thirst

Raining down a flood of food and drink,
May I dispel the ills of thirst and famine.
And in the ages marked by scarcity and want,
May I myself appear as drink and sustenance.

Meaning of stanza is clear. Wish to rain down food and drink for those who are dispelled of food and drink, to dispel sufferings of thirst and hunger. May food and drink descend on those hungry and thirsty. May I turn into food and drink for them.

This mental training can translate into real food and drink in the future because when one's practice becomes advanced, when one has realizations, one can emanate food and drink that eliminates thirst and hunger. Before we can do that, we need to train in wish to do so.

Stanza 10

We are dedicating for fulfillment of all wishes.

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.

This prayer to be able to fulfill the wishes of sentient beings – may I become a treasure that will fulfill their wishes and may I turn into various articles of necessities and dispel their destitution.

Question 1: in dedication, I'm not sure where it fits in this discussion but would like to hear Geshela's comments. The idea of thinking of accumulated merits of all sentient beings. Dedicating all those accumulated merits to Buddha, Dharma, Sangha or for benefit of all sentient beings. E.g. if one is in Gompa – e.g. in Tibet, real devotion, and think of all this devotion – can I dedicate all this to 3 jewels for all sentient beings' benefit. Throughout time, maybe in 3 times of all dedication and good will and that kind of idea – if Geshela could talk about that.

You are asking about dedicating others' virtues and merit? And not just present virtues but also past, present, and future?

Answer: so you can dedicate all virtue of all living beings, Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, 3 times.

It's very important for us to understand why we dedicate virtues. It's said every time we create a virtue, but why? Failing to dedicate virtue is like not having a lock on your door. If you don't have a lock on the door, then thieves can come and steal your things. If you don't dedicate the virtue, your virtues can be stolen or lost. Before we attain enlightenment, there's a possibility we get angry. By getting angry, virtues we've created are damaged. E.g. they don't bring about result or result gets reduced / discounted. For that reason, it's important for us to dedicate our virtues well.

Let's consider scenario where I create virtue but fail to dedicate. But someone observing I created virtue and rejoices in my virtue. b/c I didn't dedicate, if I get angry, my roots of virtue get damaged, but person who rejoices gains merit from doing so.

Let's say 10 people who offer tsog together. One of these ten people then dedicate virtues of everyone very sincerely. May the virtue created by all ten persons become causes of enlightenment. This person derives great benefit. But such a practice is not able to protect virtues of the 9 persons who fail to do dedication.