

English Dharma talk

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A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life (*Bodhicaryavatara*) – Class 2

By *Shantideva*

In the previous class, I mentioned something beautiful and attractive. May be I will talk more about that. *Geshela* mentioned about a Facebook page entry – the most attractive makeup is a smile. If you examine the nature of the external manifestation, it reflects the inner emotions. Usually, if there is a smile on someone's face, that shows affection or positive emotions in his/ her mind. All of us like to look at the faces that are smiling. If in our hearts we do not have positive emotions but anger, jealousy, or competitiveness, it is difficult to show a beautiful face.

To have good motivation it is not enough to have prayers to make negative emotions to go away. It is important to bring about transformation - we need to make positive emotions stronger and negative emotions weaker. This process of mental transformation relies on logic that based on reasoning or analytical contemplation like reading a text, listening to explanations. This text, "*Guide to the Bodhisattva way of Life*" helps us to increase positive emotions and decrease negative emotions.

To give an example, when we were studying "*Letters to a Friend* by *Nagarjuna*", at one point there was a discussion about how we work with pride, why we become arrogant and mind become puffed up. Thinking that others have many good qualities too make us less arrogant. That helps us to increase our positive emotions.

In the last session we went through the expression of worship – first half of first stanza. Some of you have requested a brief of explanation of three jewels. Let us pay attention to first line of first stanza:

"To those who go in bliss, the Dharma they have mastered, and to all their heirs,"

This line indicates all 3 jewels.

Those who go in bliss or "*sugatha*", is the Sanskrit word meaning 6 excellent qualities: 3 of abandonment and 3 of realization. Buddha is someone who possess these qualities. Having understood that there is such a being with perfect qualities, it implies a wonderful state.

What is mentioned by *Dharma* jewel is the true path to a state of wellbeing. When we train our minds – our attitude and mentality, we attain the qualities of *Dharma* jewel. This enable the cessation of suffering.

The third of the Triple Gem is the *Sangha* jewel. This refers to highly realized practitioners. In Buddhism, all beings have the potential for enlightenment.

It is the case that all of us have the potential. Then why we are not yet enlightened? We need to exert to achieve that status. We should know that those highly realized beings were one time not so. They progressively acquired that status. We need to do the same. We make effort to learn new qualities, we attain something new. If we do put effort to achieve the excellent qualities, then it is a matter of time that we too become Buddhas.

The nature of our mind is such that it has the constant capacity to learn new things. However, we haven't utilized the full capacity yet. The potential of our mind to attain excellent qualities to become enlightened is called "Buddha nature" or "Buddha lineage".

To give an example, here in Edmonton the weather is cold. In Autumn, you plant some seeds outside a greenhouse and put fertilizer. And you do the same, inside the greenhouse. What happens when the weather turns cold? The seeds inside the greenhouse could germinate but not the seeds outside. Similarly, our minds are the same: we all have the potential to germinate. However, depend on the condition, seeds will grow or not. When we have lack of positive conditions, occupied by disturbing emotions like anger, pride, and attachment, it is difficult for the seed of enlightenment to grow.

Consider the seeds that were sown outside the greenhouse. When the Spring comes, these seeds may activated and start germinate. So it is the same potential inside or outside the greenhouse. It is the condition that matters. We all have the same potential and Buddha nature. It is the matter of time that we could become fully enlightenment beings.

I like to mention that this explanation that we all can become Buddhas is a unique feature in Buddhism. Because in other religions, it says that the followers of god cannot become a god. In Buddhism, there is no distinction. It is like if you put water to a vessel filled with water. It is the same water. So when one become fully enlightened there is no difference between those who enlightened before.

Let us look at stanza 1 of Chapter 1: It identifies 3 jewels in the first line. The second line,

"To all who merit veneration, I bow down."

The author venerates all who deserve worship. Having expressed homage what does he do next? He explains the promise to explain the subject matter:

"According to tradition, I shall now in brief describe

The entrance to the bodhisattva discipline."

According to the commentary, the explanation has 4 parts:

1. Identifying the subject matter
2. Rejecting criticism that the fault of self-fabrication occurred
3. Rejecting criticism that a fault of repetition occurs
4. Identifying four properties

First of all identifying the subject matter, *Shantideva* states about the vast teachings of Buddha. Why does *Shantideva* need to summarize the subject matter? Because Buddhist teachings are very voluminous. So it is necessary to summarize. After this there are two points to consider: rejecting criticism of self-fabrication and repetition. To address the criticism, *Shantideva* might have incurred fabrication, there is no repetition of Buddhist teachings. Because people do not have time for repetition and it is convenient to understand easily, so a summary is presented.

What is the purpose of expression of worship? When one has collected lots of merits one becomes a subject of worship. What is the purpose of making a promise to complete the explanation? Ordinary people usually forget about the promises. But excellent beings keep their promises like that cast in rock.

The fourth section is to identify the four properties. These are important in any treatise. They are:

1. Subject matter
2. Purpose
3. Essential purpose or the purpose of the purpose
4. Relationship

These four properties are important to understand. In the past, someone in India has written a text saying that the crows have teeth! So it is important to have a text that is true. Another example is that it is explained how one can take crown jewels of a *Naga* King. So this is not a useful text because no one can do it!

In brief, if you want to determine if it is a good treatise you should consider those four properties.

Let us identify the four properties: First the subject matter – that is *Mahayana* path along with results. The second property is purpose – that is to understand the treatise. The third property is by understanding the purpose one will generate enthusiasm to contemplate and meditate on teachings. So the results will come about – the fruits of fully enlightenment. The fourth property is with the relationship means that the latter property will not occur without the previous properties.

Next we have a section called “abandoning arrogance”- The reason for enthusiasm in composing the treatise. This has three parts:

1. Abandoning arrogance – since the treatise is not composed primarily for the sake of others
2. The reason for enthusiasm in composing the treatise
3. Indicating that it will be meaningful also for others who are equally fortunate

The first of these three parts corresponding to the first half of the stanza 2:

“What I have to say has all been said before,

And I am destitute of learning and of skill with words.”

This expression of *Shantideva* meaning that he has no skill of composing poetry and he is doing it for others. Thus discarding the possibility of arrogance. This brings us to the next outline, reason for composing. In the second half of second stanza:

“I therefore have no thought that this might be of benefit to others;

I wrote it only to sustain my understanding.”

Shantideva explains why he is enthusiastic in composing the text. He has received many teachings in the past. So to familiarize what he learned, he is doing this.

The first half of stanza 3:

“My faith will thus be strengthened for a little while,

That I might grow accustomed to this virtuous way.”

Shantideva here explains, “By writing this text my faith on Buddhist teachings will grow.”

The third part saying that others of equal fortune will benefit means that it is not only *Shantideva* but other could benefit from this treatise.

“But others who now chance upon my words

May profit also, equal to myself in fortune.”

Previously *Shantideva* said that he composed this text for the benefit of others who have interest like him.

With that we move to the next big section. This explains the path of Truth. This has two parts:

1. Exaltation to take the essence of the precious human rebirth endowed with freedoms and privileges
2. Explanation of the way to take the essence

“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?”

Here it is explained that the precious human rebirth is hard to find with freedoms and privileges. Why it is so? You should think about that. We are on this planet Earth among 7 billion of us. Some people are rich, some are poor. Some live with difficulty and some live with ease. Why we have so many differences? You can examine how differently people see others. By looking at a rich man, poor man thinks that the rich man has no difficulty. The rich looks at the poor and thinks that he is carefree and nothing to worry. But the reality is everyone is filled with worries. Rich man may worry about how to manage his affairs. Poor man is worry about his next meal. So everyone has their own share of worry.

Look at all the people inhabiting this Earth. They all had the precious human rebirth. 7 billion of them. So why we say it is rare to have precious human rebirth. It is comprised of 8 freedoms and 10 privileges.

What are these 18 qualities: 8 freedoms and 10 privileges. If you recall, it was explained in *Nagarjuna's* "Letters to a Friend" in stanzas 63 and 64:

(63) Rebirth as someone holding a distorted, antagonistic outlook, as a creeping creature, a clutching ghost, or in a joyless realm, or rebirth where the words of the Triumphant are absent, or as a barbarian in a savage border region, or stupid and dumb,

(64) Or as a long-lived god – rebirths as any (of these) are the eight faulty states that have no leisure. Having found leisure, being parted from them, make effort for the sake of turning away from (further) rebirth.

Eight Freedoms:

1. Freedom from being reborn with wrong views
2. Freedom from being born as an animal
3. Freedom from born as a hungry ghost
4. Freedom from born in hell realms
5. Freedom from born in boarder region where Buddhist teachings are absent
6. Freedom from being born as a barbarian
7. Freedom from born with incomplete faculties or stupid and dumb
8. Freedom from being born as a long lived god

So think about whether we have all 8 freedoms. If you examine the beasts living in this world, you will see that any being won't have all 8 freedoms. It will be good if you have all 8 freedoms! When you go to bed tonight think about all 8 freedoms and see how many you have. It will make you happy to think that you have them all!

Q. Buddhism teaches us how to get out of cyclic birth. How did we enter this circle?

A. How did we fall into cyclic existence? There is this picture of "Wheel of Life". There you can see that in the center, there are three animals representing three main causes that make us to fall into cyclic existence. The three animals are rooster, snake, and pig. The two animals emerge from the mouth of the pig. What do the animals represent?

Pig → ignorance

Rooster → attachment

Snake → anger

The fact that the rooster and the snake emerge from the mouth of the pig represent that the attachment and anger emerge from ignorance. Why is the ignorance the cause of attachment and anger? Ignorance generate attachment and anger. When we generate attachment and anger we get into trouble. If we like something, that craving leads to attachment. In the picture, half of it is white and half

of it is dark. White half represents good actions and the dark part, our negative or bad actions. Because of this negative actions, we experience cyclic birth.

What is ignorance? Let me explain it more. There are so many animals but why the pig represent ignorance? A pig enjoys food. No matter how much food is given, the pig eats them all. In reality, there is motive for the pig's owner to give food to the pig: to make it fatten! What does ignorance do to our mind? As *Shantideva* says in ***Bodhicaryavatara***, we cling to the "I" that leads to attachment. We think "my relatives, my friends, my things" like that. When someone say something against, then we get angry. Because we cling to this "I" and we hold ourselves high. This "I" appears to be independent and self-sufficient. This leads to other kinds of negative thoughts like anger and attachment. This pig is used to represent ignorance because the pig is puffed up with ignorance thinking he has all the food and confused about reality. We too are under the influence of this ignorance and motivated to do wrong things.

Q (again – by a young child) What I really wanted to know was how did we enter this cyclic birth in the first place?

A. (by the translator) *Geshela* says that there wasn't a time that you were not in cyclic birth. That means it is not the case that originally you were not in the cyclic birth and then at some point you fell into cyclic birth. *Geshela* says that right from the very beginning you were in the cyclic existence. Actually, it is not crucial that how we were in the beginning. Because now we are in cyclic birth and what we must learn is how we should get out of it. To give you an example, in the past, you think you had some delicious food. Thinking of that won't fill your tummy today. You should try to find a way to find food instead!