

English Dharma talk
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A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life (Bodhicaryavatara) – Class 9

By Shantideva

Let's begin by thinking of a stanza from the Foundation of all Good Qualities by Lama Tsongkhapa:

Understanding that the precious freedom of this rebirth is found only once,
Is greatly meaningful and difficult to find again,
Please bless me to generate the mind that unceasingly,
Day and night, takes its essence.

So this precious human rebirth is a special kind of human rebirth. It's not just any human existence. Rather, it's endowed with the 8 pleasures and 10 freedoms. Having obtained it, we may think we'll get it again but that's not so. It's very hard to do so.

If such a human rebirth is quite rare and having obtained it now, I can't get it in the future, why should I care? What's the problem?

It's greatly meaningful. We can use it to accomplish great meaning. Therefore, we should be concerned that it's quite rare.

This human rebirth is greatly meaningful. How so? We can use it to achieve many goals. E.g. to become wealthy. Or health.

So this precious human rebirth can be used to achieve many aims. The most meaningful of these aims is to become free from suffering. At this point in time, we are not able to help others become free from suffering and pain. So if we can work towards becoming free from suffering, then this is one of the greatest goals we can aim for.

And if all the available conditions are present, we can attain highest enlightenment in this life. For that reason, we must cherish our precious human rebirth and not let it go to waste.

If we appreciate the value of a precious human existence, and we want to use it well. What can we do? On one level, we can aim for a good life, not just for oneself, but also to help others achieve a good life to live well happily and with comfort. Setting our sights further, we can think about our future life. One might have some doubts about what will happen after this life ends. So aiming to have a good future life is a possible way of using our precious human existence. Aiming to have a good life next life. On the highest level, we can think about using our human existence to achieve the most perfect state, to help all living beings to achieve the state of highest enlightenment too.

In the previous chapter, in the first chapter entitled the Excellence of Bodhicitta, we discussed the mind of enlightenment. The one medicine that has the ability to dispel all sicknesses is the mind of enlightenment, bodhicitta.

Bodhicitta is able to eliminate every kind of suffering. Every kind of unhappiness. If we are able to cultivate bodhicitta, even for a brief moment, perhaps not very extensively, we'll experience many benefits, b/c the mind of enlightenment causes us to feel happy. When we feel at ease, then the elements within our body will be able to maintain a state of balance. This means it's less likely that we'll fall sick. Even if we do fall sick, we'll recover quickly. This means we'll also enjoy a long life. So these are some of the benefits you can experience as a result of cultivating bodhicitta in this life. The scientists have also verified that a relaxed mind leads to good health. This is not something only found in the explanations of spiritual traditions.

When you were reciting the heart sutra today, you read this passage that stated the great qualities of the mantra. It's said that before the actual statement of the mantra that the mantra is the mantra of great knowledge. It's an unsurpassable mantra, a mantra that makes one's mind unsurpassable, peerless. It's equal to the unequalled mantra. This is really the supreme knowledge mantra. And able to pacify all sufferings. After stating all these wonderful attributes, the mantra is stated.

How can you obtain all these great benefits from practicing the great perfection? As the syllables indicate, you need to pass through a number of stages.

Gate: that represents the first of the 5 paths, the path of accumulation

Gate: path of preparation

Paragate: path of seeing

Paramsamgate: path of meditation

Bodhi: awakening that corresponds to the path of no more learning or full enlightenment.

It's through passing through these stages as one would mount the stairs of a staircase that one can arrive at the state of highest enlightenment.

If we want to attain the state of full enlightenment, then we have to actively ascend through these stages so that we can eventually achieve our goal. Just reciting the mantra is not sufficient. While reciting it brings great benefits, just by reciting it 100s and 1000s of times will not lead us to enlightenment. We need to actively create causes that bring us from stage to stage. What we need to do is cultivate the mind of enlightenment.

If you feel inspired to generate mind of enlightenment, you want to know how to do it. Is it something I can just think about it and generate that mind? It requires preparation. As mentioned before, if you are going to invite a very important person, Prime Minister, etc., then you need to prepare the place first. You need to set up tables and chairs, food and drinks and so on. There are certain things you can do before you can effectively generate the mind of enlightenment.

The mind of enlightenment is something that's very precious and special. It's not going to arise in our continuum without us making any effort. We do need to make effort. We need to make preparations before bodhicitta can be generated in our mind. What we need to do in the beginning is engage in purification, confession of negativities. Many past lives, we've accumulated quite a bit of negativities, misdeeds, obscurations, so we need to purify those and on top of that, accumulate merit. This is like first cleaning the room and then setting up the tables and chairs. Accumulating merit is setting up tables and chairs and food and drink. Having made all these preparations, we make the favourable conditions for bodhicitta to arise.

At the beginning of the second chapter, there are two main outlines regarding how to uphold the mind of enlightenment.

First: performing the preliminaries or preparations of prostrations, making offerings, and going for refuge, and then confessing negativities, which are the unfavourable conditions by way of the complete four powers.

The second main section: having accumulated the favourable condition of merit through rejoicing and so forth, actually upholding the mind of enlightenment.

We'll begin by talking about the preparations. One of these is making offerings. Under this section, first we will explain the purpose of making offerings. Second is the actual practice of making offerings.

2.1 explains the purpose:

To the buddhas, those thus gone,
And to the sacred Dharma, spotless and supremely rare,
And to the Buddha's offspring, oceans of good qualities,
That I might gain this precious attitude, I make a perfect offering.

Why are we making offerings here? We want to be able to generate the mind of enlightenment. To take up this practice of bodhicitta, being able to uphold it, that we make offerings. We should compare the motivation this with our usual motivation for making offerings. Perhaps we engage in making offerings, prostrations or reciting prayers or circumambulating because we are going to take an exam. Or we want to recover from our sickness. So we engage in these and so on.

In this context, we generate this mind of enlightenment. And we are making offerings so that we can achieve this goal. We shouldn't be engaging in these practices for the sake of some mundane purpose alone. May I be successful in my business; may I do well in my exams; may I have good health and not fall sick and so on. Because in this context, we are trying to achieve enlightenment. In the first chapter, we looked at how this mind of enlightenment has wonderful benefits. Feeling inspired to generate bodhicitta, we want to create the most conducive conditions for this to arise. To purify negativities in our

mind and accumulate merit, positive energy, we engage in these practices. The goal is to be able to generate bodhicitta.

Who do we make the offerings to? What the objects? At times people make offerings to worldly gods and deities and nagas, thinking these beings can help create good conditions, dispel obstacles and so on. They make some food offerings and request these worldly beings for health. We are not making offerings to these worldly beings.

There is no great purpose for making offerings to worldly gods and nagas. This is because they are not always reliable in the sense that if you make food offering to them and you praise them, they may help you remove some obstacles and help you achieve success in your work and so on. However, if you do not making offerings to them, then they will not help you. In fact, they may harm you. For that reason, there's no great purpose to making offerings to worldly beings.

In my country where I grew up (Burma), there is this practice of making offerings to worldly gods. These offerings have to be made year after year without fail because for the people there, if they make these offerings, it seems like things go smoothly in the sense that they receive certain help from these local deities and worldly gods. But if they fail to make offerings, forget to or don't for some reason, then they can receive certain harms, e.g. certain calamities, floods, and lots of rain and so on. Such worldly beings aren't completely reliable. Sometimes they can help you; sometimes they can harm you.

In our case, we make offerings to the 3 jewels: Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. As is stated in 2.1, first we make offerings to the Buddhas (those thus gone), to the fully enlightened beings abiding in the 10 directions. Next to the sacred Dharma, which refers to True Paths and True Cessations. In the continuum of Arya beings. These superior beings who have directly conceived reality. Third is the Buddha's offspring, the oceans of good qualities – Bodhisattvas, e.g. Avalokiteshvara, Manjushri and so on. We make offerings to them so that we may gain this precious attitude – mind of enlightenment – so we can generate bodhicitta in our mind.

First we described offering substances that are unowned. These are in 3.5 stanzas. 2.2 to the first half of 2.5.

2.2

I offer every fruit and flower,
Every kind of healing draft,
And all the precious things the world contains,
With all pure waters of refreshment;

2.3

Every mountain wrought of precious jewels,
All sweet and lonely forest groves,
The trees of paradise adorned with blossom,
Trees with branches bowed with perfect fruit;

2.4

The perfumed fragrance of divine and other realms,
All incense, wishing trees, and trees of gems,
All crops that grow without the tiller's care,
And every sumptuous object worthy to be offered;

2.5

Lakes and meres adorned with lotuses,
Delightful with the sweet-voiced cries of waterbirds

Here, many types of offerings are mentioned. It's not necessary to go through them one by one. It's quite clear what they refer to. In general, we can do this practice of making offerings quite conveniently. It's not absolutely necessary for us to go to a store and buy offering substances specifically for making offerings. Every day, we eat and drink; we can offer the food and drink we consume. When we go out and go for a walk, and we see pleasant objects, usually we go for a walk in a pleasant place, see flowers and forests and beautiful scenery and so on; all these can be objects of offering.

e.g. when you go for a walk and see a lake – very clean clear water, waterfall somewhere, then you can offer this water to all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas and offer it to the Dharma jewel. Simply seeing it you can make the offering. E..g you go to a certain place and see a pond. Inside this pond there are nice waterbirds and all kinds of animals you can think that I offer all of these. Any pleasant object that you see can serve as an object of offering.

e.g. see flowers, greenery, you can think I make these to the 3 jewels.

You should not misunderstand my explanation to mean that you should not specifically try to go to the store and buy some offering substance and not place it on the altar and make prostrations and so on. This is not what I'm saying. It depends on the circumstances. If we don't find time and buy offering substances before the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha on a daily basis, then we use what opportunities that come up in our life. If we see nice ponds and etc., you make offerings directly. If you are able to go to the store and procure some nice offering substances and can place it on the altar in front of the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, then you will accumulate greater merit. So it's not right to say that just because I can offer whatever around me, then it's actually useless to go to the store and make offerings deliberately. This is saying make use of all opportunities we have. If we can go to the store and make offerings, that's very good. But if we don't have the time, then we can use other opportunities.

How should we make offerings? Next 1.5 stanzas. 2.5 to 2.6

2.5

...
And everything unclaimed and free,

Extending to the margins of the boundless sky.

2.6

I hold them all before my mind, and to the mighty safe, the greatest of our kind,
And to his heirs, I make a perfect offering.
Sublime recipients, compassionate lords,
O think of me with love; accept these gifts of mine!

If we walk and see nice flowers, trees and so on, we can make offerings. How do we do this? We do it mentally through holding these objects before the mind. In other words, you don't physically pluck the flowers and take them somewhere. You hold these offerings in your mind and you think that in the space before you are the objects to whom you are making the offerings: all Buddhas and Bodhisattvas and enlightened beings and so on from 10 directions and think I make offerings to you and you request them to please think of me with love and accept these offerings of mine.

This talk about unowned things probably belongs to the past because these days everything is owned, even the ocean and space are owned. There's no such thing as unowned land. So basically what we are saying is there are these things that aren't specifically owned by certain persons. Then we can mentally offer these offerings.

In the context of making mental offerings, it probably doesn't make such a big difference whether the offering substance is owned or unowned. When we make offerings through a visualization, it's like we take it physically (pluck flower). We've explained these for unowned.

Next is the reason for making such offerings is given.

2.7

For, destitute of merit, I am very poor;
I have no other wealth. And so, protectors,
You whose wise intentions are for others' good,
In your great power, receive them for my sake.

This addresses a possible doubt that one might have. What's the point of making these mental offerings? Shouldn't one go to the store and place offerings on the altar? It's said that "For, destitute of merit, I am very poor; I have no other wealth".

If one lacks resources to make an offering, one can make these mental offerings mentioned early on of things that are unowned. This should not be an excuse for not making offerings at all. One should make offerings as earlier described. One should not think that since I can make mental offerings, then I don't have to bother to buy offerings. One shouldn't think there's no point of doing it. That's a negative attitude. One will create negativity in one's mind.

The next section describes how one can offer one's body and the stanzas 2.8 and 2.9 explain this offering:

2.8

Enlightened ones and all your Bodhisattva heirs,
I offer you my body throughout all my lives.
Supreme courageous ones accept me totally,
For with devotion I will be your servant.

2.9

For if you will accept me, I will be
Undaunted by samsara and will act for beings' sake.
I'll leave behind the evils of my past,
And ever after turn my face from them.

This offering of body might seem odd and even scary. You may think then I'll lack freedom and I won't have any say over what to do with my body.

What's meant here by offering one's body is one uses one's body in accordance with the instructions of the enlightened beings. If the enlightened being says you use your body speech and mind in this way, it'll be beneficial. If you follow these instructions, that constitutes your offering your body [to the 3 jewels?].

If one offers one's body to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, then one needs to use one's body in accordance with the instructions of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. If they say you should use your body in this way, and not in that way, then we should follow those instructions. At the minimum level, we should abandon the 10 nonvirtues. We should avoid the creation of these 10 nonvirtues.

If one having learned about the instructions to avoid the nonvirtues of body refrains from those nonvirtues, then one's making offering to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas with one's body. If one decides from now onwards, I shall not kill. From now on, I will not steal. I will not engage in sexual misconduct, then that constitutes offering one's body to the enlightened beings.

Similarly, if one avoids the nonvirtues of speech: lying, harsh speech, divisive speech and gossip, then one's making one's offering of speech to the enlightened beings.

Likewise, through refraining from covetousness, malice and wrong views, the 3 nonvirtues of mind, then one's offering one's mind to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. The offering of one's practice – refraining from nonvirtues of body, speech and mind – constitute the best offering one can make to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. At the same time, one's creating powerful virtue.

Why do we say that our practice is the best offering? For example, when you know a child is growing up. If the child can listen to his or her parents' advice and do what they

tell the child to do, then this is what makes the parents happy. So even though the child may not be able to give the parents money or food, simply by following the advice of the parents, the parents become happy. The child's so-called practice is what pleases the parents the most.

Conversely, if this child is very disobedient and doesn't listen to parents but once in while brings some gift, it's possible the parents will feel gratified. But the parents will not be truly pleased by the child's disobedience.

The Buddhas and Bodhisattvas advise us to refrain from nonvirtue and create virtue. If we are able to abandon 10 nonvirtues, the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas will be delighted. They are pleased by our offering our practice. If we fail to follow their advice and we do the opposite, create nonvirtues and so on, although we bring some nice offerings to the altar, nice flowers, fruits, make nice prayers, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas will not be completely impressed. Although by offering flowers and fruits, we are creating virtue, what they really want us to do is abandon nonvirtue and create virtue. The kind of virtue that we create by simply a little offerings here and there is not a huge virtue.

Why do we make the offering of our body in the manner described above? 2.9 explains the reason.

2.9

For if you will accept me, I will be
Undaunted by samsara and will act for beings' sake.
[I'll be able to be fearless to help others].

I'll leave behind the evils of my past,
[I can leave behind the negativities, misdeeds I've created in the past]
And ever after turn my face from them.
[from now on, I won't create misdeeds].

The next section: offerings that are mentally emanated. This kind of offerings has 2 types. Surpassable offerings & unsurpassable offerings.

The first part explains surpassable offerings or commonplace offerings: 12 types.

1. Bath
2. Clothes
3. Ornaments
4. Ointment
5. Flowers
6. Incense
7. Fruit
8. Light
9. Inestimable mansion / palace
10. Parasols
11. Musical instruments
12. Blessings that can be continually utilized in the aspect of offerings.

Next we have the first kind of offering. Bath. These are of a few types.

1. Bathhouse itself.

2.10:

A bathing chamber excellently fragrant,
With even floors of crystal, radiant and clear,
With graceful pillars shimmering with gems,
All hung about with gleaming canopies of pearls –

In this bathing chamber, we have all kinds of facilities. E.g. one will fragrant water, cloths, and so on. Perhaps we need mirrors and various objects. All these various facilities are all present.

Do you think this is actually offered? Or mentally?

Then we don't need to go through the details b/c you think it's mental.

We need to visualize what's described in 2.10. there's this squarish bathing chamber with 4 doors. The 4 sides. It's very fragrant and the floors even made of crystal, radiant and clear. In the four corners of this bathing chamber, we have graceful pillars shimmering with gems, and gleaming canopies of pearls.

Incense: so entire chamber is filled with fragrant smell.

First, we invite them to come. We think Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are abiding in the 10 directions. they come from the space. they arrive at the bathing chamber. In this bathing chamber, there are these cabinets for them to put their belongings, Crown ornaments and so on. After they've arrived, and removed their clothes and ornaments, then we offer the bath.

2.11

There the blissful Buddhas and their heirs
I'll bathe with many a precious vase,
Abrim with water fragrant and delightful,
All to frequent strains of melody and song.

Pleasant music in background.

After they've taken the bath, they have to dry their body. So this is explained by the first half of 2.12

With cloths of unexampled quality,
With spotless, perfumed towels I will dry them,

Here, in the first 2 lines of stanza 12, it's said with very fine cloths, perfumed towels, I will dry the bodies of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. This is easy to understand. In

certain texts, it's said the water on the surface of the body are gathered into 5 points. One simply dries the water from these 5 points: head, left and right shoulders, heart, and navel. Water from other parts gather at these points and we dry the water from these five points using towels.

Now they've taken a bath, we have to go on to give them clothes and ornaments. Stanza 2.12 second half and first line of 13 explain garments

2.12

...

And offer splendid scented clothes,
Well-dyed and of surpassing excellence.

2.13

With different garments, light and supple.

What clothes do you offer? New clothes. You have to offer clothes according to their manifestation. In other words, if the Buddha is in the complete enjoyment form, then there are different kinds of ornaments, such as Crowned ornament, clothes of different colours and so on. You have to offer the appropriate garments according to the who the Buddhas are. Certain Buddhas are in the aspect of ordained monks. So you won't offer their colourful ornaments; instead, you offer 3 kinds of Dharma robes. So according to what's appropriate, you offer new garments.

2.13

...

And a hundred beautiful adornments,
I will grace sublime Samanthabhadra,
Manjughosha, Lokeshvara, and their kin.

If the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are in the aspect of monks, then you offer them the alms bowls and mendicant's staff (walking stick). If they are in the aspect of the enjoyment bodies, then you offer ornaments, Crown ornaments, bracelets, anklets and so on. This is what's mentioned here.

Lokeshvara refers to Avalokiteshvara.

Khakkhara is the mendicant's staff.

Question 1 (from young child): how can you reduce the 3 poisons? How do you reduce using them?

Answer 1: many methods. E.g. if you find you are getting angry, then you should cultivate patience. If you find you have a lot of attachment, then there are various ways you can think so that you reduce attachment. As for ignorance, here we are not talking about a mere absence of knowledge. rather, we are talking about the ignorance that

misunderstands reality. In the sense that there is this self-grasping mind. When you find there's this self-grasping mind arising in yourself, you should check where is this I? how does the I exist? Similarly, you find you are angry, you should pause and check who is the person that is getting angry? How does this "I" getting angry exist?

Question 2: benefits of chanting?

Answer: many benefits; create positive energy with body, speech and mind. E.g. when reciting prayers for example before class, you are sitting properly and you are reciting. There are benefits with respect to the body being held in a good posture; verbally you are reciting these prayers; creating good energy, positive vibrations so there is benefit with respect to speech and mentally you should be thinking about the meaning of the prayers – reflecting and not just simply saying the words blah blah mindfully. Your mind is focused on the meaning, significance of what are you recite. That constitutes meditation. The benefits that can be derived from chanting. The mental benefits are the greatest benefits.

It's important for you to focus your mind on what you are reciting. Although your body may be straight and verbally you are reciting the prayers loud and clear, but if your mind has wandered off, then you will only receive 60% of the benefits. So if you want to receive the full benefits, make sure your mind is focused on the meaning of the prayers.

If you are not sitting properly on a chair or cushion, then you won't derive the benefits of the body while reciting. You are slouching, not sitting up properly. Then this is also perhaps unpleasant for others to see. It may cause them some discomfort in which case you won't receive the benefits of having good bodily posture. So if you are just reciting blah blah and your mind wandered and you're slouching, then only receive some benefits – the verbal benefits.

If you engage your body, speech and mind when chanting prayers, you experience many benefits. E.g. when we do Guru Puja, in the beginning, you go for refuge and generate bodhicitta. If you can concentrate on the meaning of the prayer as you recite it, then you will be able to generate bodhicitta more quickly. If you reflect on the meaning of what you recite, then this means you are also learning the meanings. This means as a Dharma student, you will be able to understand the meanings more clearly. You'll be able to understand meanings better in the long run.

Question 3: can chanting reduce 3 poisons?

Answer: yes! b/c 3 poisons can't come up when you're chanting properly

Question 4: when we offer something to Buddha, can we consume it? b/c in one sutra it said it can't be offered. The devas and gods would take some offerings with that. So it's not for other beings to consume? Just want to clarify.

I've never heard of this. But in the case of what we do here is a practice combined with Tantra. We bless the tsog. It's a commitment for tantric practitioners to eat the blessed food. To taste it. So it's a practice that is combined with tantra.

Geshela ask: why bury them?

It's not buried for worms. Just not to consume by people.

Answer: I can't provide an answer to your question. Here, we have a basis to be analyzed. What's this sutra?

New question: can I eat food offerings to the Buddha?

Answer: yes! they've been blessed! By consuming that food, we receive blessings. I don't see any problem with that.

e.g. when people go to see His Holiness the Dalai Lama sometimes they make offerings. After they've left, and we see the Dalai Lama, he says eat them! We'd be so delighted!

There's no problem.

Geshela: maybe we should investigate where such a sutra exists. That you should not consume offerings made to the Buddha. The fact is that there are many faithful followers of the Buddha who consume the offerings made to the Buddha.

Even if there is such a sutra that explicitly says you should not eat offerings to me, we need to see that sutra in its entirety and not take it out of context and not claim that we need to follow it to the letter. This is because the whole sutra may indicate a specific circumstances in which the Buddha made that statement. So perhaps a special purpose / reason. Maybe circumstances for stating that. We should not take it out of context.

To illustrate this, in a sutra the Buddha said kill your father and mother. If this is taken out of context, and read literally, then one would go kill one's own parents. However, in other contexts, in other sutras, the Buddha said if you were to kill your father / mother, you'd create one of the 5 heinous crimes. Both are by Buddha. So what are we to do? We need to understand sutra in proper context.