

English Dharma talk
April 15, 2017
By Geshe Pema Tshering
Land of Compassion Buddha Edmonton
<http://compassionbuddha.ca>

A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life (Bodhicaryavatara) – Class 8

By Shantideva

Let's turn to stanza 28 of our root text. We will start the class directly by looking at a stanza.

For beings long to free themselves from misery,
But misery itself they follow and pursue.
They long for joy, but in their ignorance
Destroy it, as they would a hated enemy.

All living beings wish for happiness. No one wishes for suffering. This is something we can safely assume about each and every living being. So everyone is trying their best to achieve happiness. This kind of wish arises very naturally.

In the first half of the stanza:

For beings long to free themselves from misery,
But misery itself they follow and pursue.

All living beings want to be free from difficulties and problems. However, they fail to recognize the causes of the difficulties. So they create the causes of suffering. So it is as if they are actively creating the causes of suffering. As a result of creating those causes, so naturally they experience suffering. For that reason, misery itself they follow and pursue.

Second half:

They long for joy, but in their ignorance
Destroy it, as they would a hated enemy.

Living beings want happiness. However, due to ignorance, they are not able to recognize happiness as happiness. As a result, they destroy happiness as if happiness were an enemy.

This stanza is saying that even though living beings want to be free from suffering. Because they can't recognize the causes of suffering, they create those causes and as a result, suffer. They want happiness, but can't create the causes of happiness. So as a result, they destroy the causes of happiness.

So what we need to ask ourselves is: what are the causes of suffering? What are the causes of happiness?

Let's consider the following e.g. We want happiness in this life. We try to find it in the food we eat, the clothes we wear, the house we live in and so on. Even though these objects don't bring us true lasting happiness, we cannot deny they do bring us some form of happiness.

All these necessities of life come about by depending on others. If we look at the food that we eat. They have to be grown somewhere, say in the suburbs and countryside. Someone must grow them; else we don't have food. Similarly, clothes we wear depend on people manufacturing them. Require many people working together to make them. Also house we live in depends on others. To build a house, many materials are required. These materials come about by depending on others.

The reality is we rely upon many many people in our quest for happiness. We likely rely on hundreds, thousands of people to obtain the things we use in our life. But we do not think about others at all. The sole thought we have in most cases is the thought to fulfill our own happiness. May I find happiness through my food, clothes, and so on. We don't have the slightest concern for others. We don't think: may they achieve happiness. There's this disregard for others' welfare. In the course of our quest for happiness, we engage in unskillful actions, e.g. speaking harsh words to others. Behaving in nasty ways to others and so on.

The reality is every kind of little happiness that we enjoy in our lives depends on others. But we don't care about others at all. We are constantly thinking about our own wellbeing. Our own welfare. We don't have the slightest thought for other living beings. It is stated in Lama Chopa (Guru Puja) that cherishing others is the door to all happiness while cherishing ourselves is the basis of all misery.

So understanding that cherishing others is the cause of all forms of happiness and cherishing ourselves is the cause of all misery, then we should learn to exchange self and others. In other words, we should think that I want to cherish others instead of cherishing myself and being obsessed with my happiness all the time. I should learn to care about others; learn to be concerned about their wellbeing. In this stanza, of all Guru Puja, it ends with this request for blessings to be able to exchange self and others, to cherish others instead of to cherish oneself.

So that stanza Geshela just quoted now is stanza 94:

Since cherishing ourselves is the doorway to all torment,
While cherishing our mothers is the foundation of all that is good,
We seek your blessings to make our core practice
The yoga of exchange of self for others.

...

For a start, by being concerned with others around us, we can easily cultivate concern for all living beings.

To give an example of how we can start to do this practice with people around us. Let's say we go to a hot place. Me and a few companions. We end up in this very warm place. b/c it's warm, then my friends might want to switch on the fan or air conditioner. However, I have some kind of adversity to the AC b/c it gives me the stomach ache. If I say to them, don't turn it on b/c it makes me unwell, then it's a case of not being concerned with others' needs.

So instead of insisting that they can't use the fan, what I can do is to perhaps put on more clothing so that I won't get a stomachache if they were to switch on the AC. If instead of doing that, I have a very strong self-cherishing and insist that they don't turn on the AC, then my friends will be suffering in the heat. As a result of that, everyone becomes very tense. We might start to quarrel and get into a fight and everyone's unhappy. So instead of cherishing myself and thinking what I want is the most important, it is important to think about others and cherish them. Instead of insisting that I need to fulfill my own needs before the needs of others. I can think of how to fulfill others' needs. In that way, harmony can be maintained. They can enjoy the coolness of the fan and I won't get sick. Everyone will be relaxed. Everyone will be comfortable.

To give another example, so in a family, the members have meals together. It's hard for one type of food to satisfy everyone. So someone might say I want to eat noodles. Others say I want to eat nice. Others say they want more green vegetables. The food that is served at a certain meal may not satisfy everyone. If the members have very strong self-cherishing, then it's easy to get into a conflict situation. Instead of being very fixed about what one needs to eat, one can be more relaxed and think that the purpose of eating food is to fill the stomach. So regardless of whether I have pasta or noodle soup or rice, the food is going to fill my stomach. There's no need for me to insist that I must eat this. I cannot eat that. By having a more relaxed attitude, spacious mind, then conflicts can be avoided within the family. So this is the way to train in cherishing others. This is the way to train in reducing one's self-cherishing mind. One's self-centred mind. One needs to begin with the people who are within one's vicinity: friends and family who are right there around oneself. If one is able to train our mind with respect to the people who are near, then it is easy to eventually extend the mind cherishing others to all living beings. That is the way to train the mind. If one's mind is vast, then one will experience happiness. If one's mind is narrow, always thinking about me me me, then it's hard to find happiness.

To achieve happiness, it's crucial that we identify accurately the causes of happiness. And then adopt those causes of happiness. Between mental happiness and physical happiness, mental happiness is more important. This is because if the mind is happy, even though physically when we experience some discomfort, the happiness in the mind will be able to overcome that physical discomfort. However, the reverse is not true. If one is physically very well. However the mind is unhappy, then it'll be difficult for the physical wellbeing to overcome mental unhappiness.

Who or what are the culprits causing unhappiness? What makes us unhappy? They are the disturbing emotions, the afflictive states of mind: attachment, anger, ignorance, jealousy and pride.

How do we get rid of these negative emotions that are behind our problems and unhappiness? We need to understand what causes these negative emotions. We need to understand the nature of these negative emotions. It is only through such understanding that we can eliminate unhappiness. There is no other method that can remove problems; no other method that can remove our unhappiness. When you look at the causes of these negative emotions that are the causes of unhappiness, you will see that they are all rooted in the self-cherishing thought, that I want to be happy. This kind of obsession with one's own welfare causes these negative emotions.

Let's go on to read the next two stanzas: 29 and 30.

29

But those who fill with bliss
All beings destitute of joy,
Who cut all pain and suffering away
From those weighed down with misery,

30

Who drive away the darkness of their ignorance –
What virtue could be matched with theirs?
What friend could be compared to them?
What merit is there similar to this?

So in stanza 28, we talked about how sentient beings are not able to find happiness; they encounter suffering and they do not know the causes of happiness; the causes of suffering. The opposite situation from that is: a situation where the causes of happiness are well understood. In stanza 29, it is mentioned that those who fill with bliss, all beings destitute of joy, those who are deprived of happiness, those who cut all pain and suffering away from those weighed down with misery, those who also drive away the darkness of their ignorance. This is the way to find happiness. These qualities are found in bodhicitta, the mind of enlightenment. It wishes sentient beings deprived of happiness to be endowed with it. It wishes to remove suffering of living beings. It drives away ignorance of living beings. Bodhicitta is the supreme method and what virtue could be matched with that? Such a mind of enlightenment is the highest virtue. There is no other virtue that can be compared.

What friend could be compared to them?
What merit is there similar to this?

In terms of friends, we are looking for someone who will achieve benefit and happiness for us. Who will protect us from harm. So what friend is there that can be compared to

bodhicitta, because it wants to achieve all benefit and happiness for all. It wants to protect all living beings from harm. Also, the mind of enlightenment can reveal in a non-erroneous way all the practices that should be adopted. It explains what should be discarded to achieve happiness and avoid suffering. There is no other similar merit than bodhicitta. Thinking the mind of enlightenment is so marvelous, one should generate that thought to want to understand what it is and wanting to cultivate it. If one can make effort generating this precious bodhicitta, then it would be really excellent.

We have several stanzas that praise people who cultivate bodhicitta. Not only is the mind what we praise but also the people who cultivate it are worthy of praise. 3 subsections.

1 stanza 31 explaining that the people who render assistance out of compassion to others without having been asked are worthy of praise

If they do some good, in thanks
For favors once received, are praised,
Why need we speak of bodhisattvas –
Those who freely benefit the world?

In this stanzas, there's an example given of someone who does good in return for favours they received before. These are people who are grateful and in return for receiving a benefit, they do some good. Such people are praised in the world because they are grateful. And they repay the kindness they have received. Such people are worthy of praise in the world.

How do bodhisattvas (beings with bodhicitta) compare to such people we've mentioned earlier on (the grateful people who repay kindness)? Bodhisattvas do: work for all living beings without any need to be asked. They accomplish all kinds of benefit for all living beings. So compared to these people we've mentioned earlier on, the bodhisattvas are much more altruistic. So if that is the case, then what need is there to say that bodhisattvas are also worthy of praise?

The next subsection covers 2 stanzas. This explains that if someone who accomplishes a small benefit is worthy of praise, then someone who accomplished all the benefit must be worthy of high praise. 32 and 33:

Those who, scornfully with condescension,
Give, just once, a single meal to others –
Feeding them for only half a day –
Are honored by the world as virtuous.

What need is there to speak of those
Who constantly bestow on boundless multitudes
The peerless joy of blissful Buddhahood,
The ultimate fulfillment of their hopes?

In stanza 32, we see this example of a person who is regarded by the world as virtuous. We have a man who offers food to some people, perhaps some members of the Sangha. The recipients are just a small number of people. This man gives them mediocre food, just to fill their stomachs, nothing fancy. He gives it just once. Not a regular offering. This man offers the food with a somewhat negative attitude. He's disrespectful, not reverently and the food only satisfies the recipients for half a day. Although this food offering is not the perfect example of generosity, still, this man is praised. Oh you know, he's a great benefactor, sponsor, very virtuous.

How do the Bodhisattvas compare to this man in stanza 32? Bodhisattvas act for the welfare of all living beings, countless ones. How long do bodhisattvas act for their welfare? For a long time, over many lifetimes, not just one day. The happiness that bodhisattvas offer to all living beings is the unsurpassable, uncontaminated bliss of the fully enlightened beings. It's not some kind of contaminated happiness from a good meal that can fill the stomach. Bodhisattvas are offering the highest happiness there is. Moreover, when the bodhisattva enacts the welfare of others, the bodhisattva has a very vast and profound attitude. He/she's not just thinking of benefit sentient beings for a little while; he/she thinks about fulfilling sentient beings with special benefit upon limitless sentient beings. So if you compare the bodhisattvas with those who are mentioned in 32, the bodhisattvas are far more outstanding. If those who just give a single meal once with a disrespectful attitude and so on is worthy of praise, then what need is there to mention that bodhisattvas are worthy of praise. So of course, they are worthy of our praise and respect.

The third subsection explains that the bodhisattvas are worthy of praise because they are the supreme field of merit. This section has in turn 3 subsections. First of these is explained in stanza 34: why it's inappropriate even to slightly deride a bodhisattva.

And those who harbor evil in their minds
Against such lords of generosity, the Buddha's heirs,
Will stay in hell, the Mighty One has said,
For ages equal to the moments of their malice.

It explains that if one were to have a negative thought in relation to a Bodhisattva, then one will receive much harm. Let's say if one deprecates a Bodhisattva, one generates the wish to want to hurt them, then it's said in the sutras by the Buddhas that one would be reborn in the hells for as many eons as the instants of the negative thought. They'll remain in hell for as many eons as the thoughts. So where are the Bodhisattvas? We don't know where they are. We have to be very careful not to deprecate anyone. Not to generate malice toward anyone.

And to prove what is positive in this stanza, two sutras are cited in the commentary. The first citation comes from the Definite Pacifying Magical Emanation sutra. In the sutra, the Buddha tells Manjushri: understand that a bodhisattva who generates a mind of anger, deprecation toward a bodhisattva ... shall remain in hell for as many eons. In the second sutra, called the Sutra of the Seal of Entrance to Generating the Power of Faith, if one

generates a mind of malice toward a bodhisattva who is inclined to the Mahayana, one creates misdeeds that's countless times more than burning stupas, numbering the number of grains of sands in the bank of the river Ganges.

Why is it that by generating thoughts of malice toward Bodhisattvas, one would create such grave misdeeds? The reason is that Bodhisattvas are what causes Buddhas. If one has negative thoughts toward a fully enlightened being, then one would create much negativity. Since a fully enlightened being comes from Bodhisattvas, then if one were to harm the causes of the Buddhas, one would create very serious misdeeds. This is like if one were to cut a young apple tree, this tree can grow into a full tree that can bear many apples. By cutting a young apple tree, you are destroying the potential of the tree growing into a fully developed tree with many fruits. So for that reason, it is very negative to generate the thought to harm Bodhisattvas.

The next subsection explains why it's appropriate to cultivate faith toward Bodhisattvas.

35

By contrast, good and virtuous thoughts
Will yield abundant fruits in greater measure.

These two lines explain that if one acts out of faith toward a Bodhisattva, then the fruits of that faith will be far more than the fruit of negativity explained previously. In other words, in the previous stanza, it's been explained by generating a negative mind toward Bodhisattvas, one will create great negativity. If one were to act with faith instead, the results would be boundless. Far more extensive than the negative result that one experiences as a consequence of generating malice toward Bodhisattva. This fact is explained in the same sutra mentioned: the Seal of entrance sutra.

So having heard these explanations on how Bodhisattvas are very special beings, perhaps you feel inspired by these Bodhisattvas. Through coming to class, you've been exposed to this idea that it's possible for a person to develop altruistic intention and offer infinite benefit to all living beings. If you feel inspired, also think about wanting to become like them. This is actually a very positive state of mind. If you think they are really quite wonderful beings, I'd like to become one myself, just that thought can be very powerful. It can create vast merit, purify negativity. Think about it when you wake up; think about bodhisattvas, their infinite abilities and so on, that will be very beneficial. At night, reflect on bodhicitta, Bodhisattvas and so on. It would be very beneficial. In fact, you can do this any time if you find you have free time. If you can reflect on bodhicitta; these wonderful beings who've generated such a mind; then you'll receive much benefit.

One can purify a lot of negative energy and accumulate positive energy by thinking about the mind of enlightenment, and thinking about becoming a Bodhisattva. But what's the point of purifying negative karma and accumulating merit? If we can purify past misdeeds and accumulate merit, then we'll experience benefit now and in the future. In this very life itself, we can enjoy more success, e.g. in the work we do; enjoy better

health; less chances of falling sick. Our minds will be happier. In that way, reflecting on bodhicitta, becoming a Bodhisattva etc. can only benefit us.

The next two lines explain the conclusion that a Bodhisattva is worthy of homage and refuge.

35

...

Even in adversity, the bodhisattvas
Never bring forth evil – only an increasing stream of goodness.

As mentioned earlier, if we respect the Bodhisattvas and praise them and honour them, then we create a lot of positive energy and purify misdeeds. In that way, we can fulfill our goals more easily. We all want happiness. Therefore, we need to create causes of happiness. By engaging in virtue, respecting Bodhisattvas, honouring them, we create causes of happiness. This means we develop excellent qualities in ourselves more easily. Therefore, we should respect them and feel inspired by them and praise them.

Under the same section explaining that the Bodhisattva is worthy of homage and refuge, we have stanza 36:

To them in whom this precious sacred mind
Is born – to them I bow!
I go for the refuge in that source of happiness
That brings its very enemies to perfect bliss.

Stanza 36 expresses homage to those who've generated bodhicitta. Bodhicitta is very important for us to pay attention to, b/c regardless of whether we practice sutra or tantra, in order to enter Mahayana, you need the mind of enlightenment. It's like the doorway to the Mahayana. So we should pay much attention to the mind of bodhicitta.

In this way, we've completed the root text for chapter 1. What has been explained in chapter 1 are the benefits of the mind of enlightenment.

The excellence of bodhicitta can be understood from 2 points of view: temporal and long term of benefits.

Temporal benefits: in this very life, we will receive the benefit of generating bodhicitta. When we cultivate the mind of enlightenment, we are thinking of benefiting all living beings. That positive attitude enables us to have good relationships with all around us. This means everyone will become our friend. We'll have a relaxed state of mind. We'll remain in a state of ease, regardless of whose company we find ourselves in.

Another temporal benefit of cultivating bodhicitta is that we will not fall into an unfortunate rebirth in the future. This is because the cause of rebirth in the three lower realms is nonvirtue / misdeed. Then if we cultivate bodhicitta, we are constantly thinking

about how to benefit sentient beings. The last thing we want to do is to harm them. b/c of our altruistic thought, we won't engage in unskillful means. As a result, we don't create the causes of being reborn in the lower realms. It protects us from a lower rebirth. This is another temporal benefit.

How about the long term benefit of bodhicitta? The final benefit of bodhicitta is that it causes us to attain full enlightenment. We'll be able to attain the highest bliss that can be achieved. The supreme state of wellbeing and happiness. We all want the best kind of happiness. No one thinks I want happiness but just the lousy kind. We all want the best kind. So bodhicitta can bring us to that highest state of happiness.

We all want happiness. We all want the best situation for ourselves. There is no more effective way of achieving those goals than cultivating bodhicitta. b/c bodhicitta is the most effective way of creating positive energy / merit. It's the most effective way of achieving a good rebirth. If that's what we want, to become a human being / god in a future rebirth. In terms of achieving happiness, there is no more outstanding method than bodhicitta. Understanding this, we need to put bodhicitta into practice. Just generating it isn't sufficient. We need to try to increase that bodhicitta and fully develop it so this is the most important practice that we can do. It's the most important of all important practices.

If you find in the beginning difficult to put bodhicitta into practice, then at least you can aspire towards bodhicitta, thinking that I want to generate bodhicitta. That kind of determination also creates a lot of positive energy. So slowly, gradually, one will find one's mind turns to bodhicitta more and more. One will eventually be able to actually generate it. If you want to achieve your own purpose, generate bodhicitta. If you want to generate others' purpose and help others, also generate bodhicitta.

At the end of the chapter, you can't see it but in the Tibetan text, there's a statement stating the title of the chapter: the first chapter called "explanation of the excellence of benefits of bodhicitta" from A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life. We've completed chapter 1.

Question 1: Do Bodhisattvas have the vision of clairvoyance to feel / understand our praise to them? And ability to give blessings to those we wish to have blessings to?

Answer 1:

There are Bodhisattvas of various levels. The advanced Bodhisattvas definitely have clairvoyance. Whether or not they are aware of your prayers is not crucial. b/c when you make prayers, or when you request for blessings, you create positive energy through that positive thought.

To give an example, if you generate this thought – may I bring benefit to each living being – then you'll create a lot of positive energy. If you generate it in a contrived way, then that's contrived bodhicitta. But if you do it spontaneously, it's uncontrived. Such a

mind is very positive. Regardless of whether or not you will be able to bring benefit to all living beings, you will have created a lot of positive energy.

Another example is generating compassion. When you see someone who is sick. When you see a sick person, you may generate the thought: if only this person can recover. May this person become well again. That thought may not be able to cure that person of that sickness, but that positive thought that this person may become well generates a lot of positive energy, creates merit in your mind.

Question 2 (from young child): what are the actions that make you feel bliss?

Answer 2: let me first ask you: what does it mean to be really really happy?

Child: it feels like helping others b/c if you make others happy, then you're also happy for what you did for them.

Answer: if you want to be happy, what you have to do is to avoid what causes unhappiness. If you can not create the actions that cause unhappiness, then by the way, happiness will come to you.

So if you want to be happy, and have a relaxed peaceful mind, what you need to do is prevent negative minds or trouble-makers from overtaking your mind. What this means is you should avoid getting angry, b/c if you get angry, you'll be unhappy. Similarly, you should avoid generating attachment, so if you have strong desire for this food / clothes, that kind of attachment will make your mind disturbed. Another troublemaker is arrogance. If you think I'm the best, then when you speak to your friends, you may feel they are criticizing you. Arrogance is something that causes unhappiness. We should try to avoid that. Jealousy is another troublemaker. That also makes us unhappy. If we can prevent these troublemakers (anger, attachment, arrogance, and jealousy), then naturally we are happy.

Question 3: I don't understand. 34 talks about evil thoughts to Buddha's heirs and that results in staying in hells for moments. It really surprised me. When others have evil thoughts toward me and I tolerate them, it seemed significantly different in that stanza towards Buddha's heirs. It seems the lesson that I understand is that I didn't want to go to hell, so I want to avoid doing that action. That seems different from most lessons: wanting to do good for the sake of doing good. I don't take most fear from the teachings, so I must be misunderstanding.

Translator: it's almost threatening you. You better respect that; else you will go to hell for a long time.

Answer: this stanza is not trying to give you a motivation for respecting the Bodhisattvas and not disrespecting them. It's not saying you should generate fear of falling into the lower realms, and because of this fear, you will go on to respect the Bodhisattvas. This stanza is not giving you a motivation for that practice. Rather, it is stating as an

explanation of the results that can ensue if one were to disrespect Bodhisattvas. This text explains that if one generates positive attitude toward Bodhisattvas, then one will achieve much benefit. It says if you don't do that, because of the nature of the mind of enlightenment, you will receive downfalls. It's pointing out that it's a fact that negative consequences will follow if one generates a negative mind toward the positive beings. It's a fact there's a danger that one who generates a negative attitude toward Bodhisattvas will receive negative consequences. It's not trying to give you a reason to disrespect Bodhisattvas.

Question: I'm still confused. Aren't we saying fear is bad and we should try to avoid it?

Answer: fear in spiritual practice can be confusing. On the beginning of this explanation, there is refuge. What's the nature of the mind of refuge? The mind that goes for refuge to the 3 jewels? It is a mind that has conviction in the three jewels, in their ability to protect one from the fears of suffering of cyclic existence in general and the 3 lower realms in particular. So if one doesn't have dread of suffering, then this refuge would not come about in all.

My feeling is that you want to know if having fear alone is sufficient justification for Dharma practice? I want to practice the Dharma –why? b/c I want to avoid suffering in the lower realms. No other reason. So if your motivation for engaging in spiritual practice is just fear alone, then that kind of practice is a limited form of practice. So it is virtue engaging in spiritual training for the sake of avoiding suffering, but among the various forms of virtue, that is the least kind of virtue. If we apply the language of the lam rim, it is what we call the small scope virtue. Your rationale for engaging in Dharma practice.

Question: Is it ok to use your fear in your Dharma practice not to base your whole practice on but to use it as well as desire to benefit others?

Answer: precisely, there are different facets to a motivation that causes one to enter into spiritual practice. If you want to benefit all living beings, not just thinking avoiding pain for yourself and you're thinking to achieve good for all living beings, wanting to be of assistance to all living beings, then the consequences that are mentioned in 34 will help you not be involved in disrespecting Bodhisattvas. b/c if you really want to benefit others, and you unskillfully generate malice to Bodhisattvas. What's being said here is you'll fall into a hell realm. If that can happen, you want to avoid it, b/c you won't be in the best situation for helping Bodhicitta and helping other beings. So it's telling you there's a danger this will happen if you were to do things. But it shouldn't be the whole motivation for you not wanting to disrespect Bodhisattvas. There are many dimensions to spiritual practice. If someone's motivation for spiritual practice is solely ..., then that's what we call a small virtue. Someone with added dimensions for motivation for spiritual practice can create greater virtue. You think: if I do this, I'll go to hell, how will I help living beings and generate bodhicitta? That's extra motivation for not disrespecting Bodhisattvas.

What we've discussed is worth reflecting on. Before class next week, there's a time set aside for discussion. All of you should express your opinions regarding this point. If you are not able to come to a clear understanding of how to interpret this stanza, then you can bring up your questions in class next week.