

English Dharma talk

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A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life (Bodhicaryavatara) – Class 10

By Shantideva

Let's begin today's class by chapter 7, stanza 17, though you do not have the text yet. It shows our tendency towards enlightenment.

[7:17] "Oh, but how could I become enlightened?"

Don't excuse yourself with such despondency!

The Buddha, who declares the truth,

Has truly spoken and proclaimed

First we have to understand the idea of enlightenment, how to be purified.

In stanza 19, Shantideva shows the importance of enlightenment by saying that all Buddhas have recognized the state of full enlightenment.

[7:19] And if, by birth and lineage of human kind,

I'm able to distinguish good from ill

And do not leave aside the Bodhisattva deeds,

Why should I not attain the state of Buddhahood?

We are in a similar situation now because we are born human. We are able to understand what is beneficial and not. Then why we are not enlightened yet? What we need to do is to practice the teachings. If we don't know the meaning, it is difficult. Those actions negative and non-virtue, if we can avoid, then that is it. What is the reason we do not engage in purification? What we need to do is generate the idea to actualize the teachings.

In the previous class we talked about various types of offerings. One type is ornaments. We offer earrings and bracelets. For a Buddhist monk who is ordained you can offer an alms bowl and a sounding staff as ornaments.

About the sounding staff: There are two stupas on top. That represents 37 components which symbolizes 37 branches of enlightenment. There are four corners of the staff that represent the Four Noble Truths. Each of these four corners has 3 rings, totaling 12 rings. That represents 12 dependent origination. Three rings represent the three status of Dharma practice, viz., ethical self-discipline or Shamata/ Vipassana meditation, discriminating awareness, and mental stability.

How this staff is used? When the Buddha went on for alms, He carried this staff and shake it when He is in front of a house. The householders hear the sound and come out with alms to offer. The monks are advised to sound it three times. If no one responds, then they move on.

We discussed the types of offerings previously. The first is a bath. Another commentary explained that bath water can be changed to what the sentient beings needed. We can imagine that bath water is transformed into nectar that is consumed by demi-gods. Then for human beings for whatever the way needed. For the hungry ghosts and for hell-beings as protection from extreme heat.

Stanza 14 of Chapter 2 says,

[2:14] And with a sumptuous fragrance that

Pervades a thousand million words,

I will anoint the bodies of the mighty Sages,

Gleaming bright like burnished gold refined and cleaned

Here we offer fragrance to the Buddhas after their bath. Next we offer flowers in stanza 15.

[2:15] I place before the mighty sages, perfect objects of my worship,

Glorious flowers like the lotus and mandarava,

The Utpala, and other fragrant blossoms,

Worked and twined in lovely scented garlands.

Lots of flowers are mentioned in this stanza. You can offer any kind of flowers to these mighty Sages. You can offer garlands of flowers or offer loose flowers in formation. The text is composed based on Indian tradition. It is not necessary to follow it that way. In Chinese culture, they offer bunch of flowers. In western traditions, you can follow the way flowers are offered.

In essence when you make an offering you have to have the sense that “this is nice and I want to offer it”. It is important that you feel that something is nice and you genuinely wants to offer it.

[2:16] I will offer swelling clouds of frankincense,

Whose ambient perfume ravishes the mind,

And various foods and every kind of drink,

All delicacies worthy of the gods.

In the case of offering of incense we offer smoke that comes from burning of certain herbs. The main point here is that when you burn the substance it produces smoke. Perhaps some of you do not like the smell of incense. What to do about it? If you don't like it, do not offer it.

The seventh type of offering is the food offering. It is mentioned in the second half of stanza 16:

And various foods and every kind of drink,

All delicacies worthy of the gods.

Here you offer any kind of food that is delicious. You can visualize and offer them to the Buddha too.

The eighth offering is the light offering and it is stated in stanza 2:17.

[2:17] I will offer precious lamps,

Arranged in rows on lotuses of gold,

A carpet of sweet flowers scattering

Upon the level, incense-sprinkled ground.

The offering of light is described in first two lines. It is to dispel darkness. These days we have electricity. So you can offer that light. Electricity is really useful. In the year 2008, I was doing a retreat. I was using my brother's room. There was no electricity that time. So we used some kind of battery power. When I used the electric lamp, I couldn't see the text clearly. So I had hard time reading the text. That happened for few days. When I read the stanza of offering of light, I remembered the deprivation of light!

The ninth offering is stated in stanza 18 as inestimable things like mansions.

[2:18] To those whose very nature is compassion

I will give vast places, resounding with fair praise,

All decked with precious pearls and beauteous pendant gems,

Gleaming jewels that deck the amplitude of space.

Here the palaces are described as having even floors with loose flowers scattered on them and adorned with gleaming jewels. You can use your imagination and offer a beautiful mansion to Buddha. Even a golf course! Geshela is very impressed with golf courses with green grass and beautiful ponds. We like to offer something heavenly. But we do not know how they look like. So we offer what we could imagine.

The tenth offering is parasols as it is mentioned in stanza 2:19.

[2:19] Fair and precious parasols adorned with golden shafts,

All bordered round with hems of precious jewels,

Upright, well-proportioned, pleasing to the eye,

Again, all this I give to all the Buddhas.

It is quite clear in this stanza what we offer here. When we make the offering we could pray that all sentient beings be protected by heat by this parasol. Using a parasol we can prevent that kind of suffering. All the sufferings and torments of sentient beings be eliminated. However, here in Canada weather is quite cold. So when you get some sun you are happy. So what 's the point using a parasol? Here in Edmonton we can offer heating devices instead! Remember this stanza is created according to the context of Indian weather. However the idea is clear.

Next we offer musical instruments as in stanza 2:20.

[2:20] May a host of other offerings,

And clouds of ravishing sweet melody

That solaces the pain of living beings

Arise and constantly abide.

What kind of music? There is no specific kind. You can offer a melody that soothes sentient beings. You can offer any kind of music that makes you feel relaxed.

The 12th kind of offering is the one that is blessed as in stanza 21.

[2:21] May rains of flowers and every precious gem

Fall down in an unceasing stream

Upon the Jewels of Sacred Dharma,

Images and all supports for offering.

The point of this offering is to imagine that you offer continuously. For example, in my case I offer water, and prayers in the morning, I come back in the evening and offer light. We basically imagine the rain showers unceasingly on Three Jewels. We also offer images of stupas to Buddha. We imagine that the Three Jewels receive unceasing offerings.

Next we offer unsurpassable offerings in stanza 2:22.

[2:22] Just as Manjughosha and the like

Made offering to all the Conquerors,

I do likewise to all the Buddhas our protectors,

And to all their Bodhisattva children.

Why we make unsurpassable offerings? Here we think that I am going to offer sages like Manjushri, Buddhaghosha to Buddha.

The next section concerns paying homage. There are two divisions: mental and physical.

[2:23] To these vast oceans of good qualities

I offer praise, a sea of airs and harmonies.

May clouds of tuneful eulogy

Ascend unceasingly before them.

The emphasis mentioned here is the idea of infinity. Buddhas and Bodhisattvas have infinite qualities. When we offer we make whole sea of any kind. According to the commentary when you offer the oceans of eulogy you can visualize many offerings by an individual. You may find it difficult to think of many. Then, imagine like this: In the future you may take many rebirths. Think of all these bodies make the offerings. Imagine that you are leading all those bodies to make the offering.

If you can manage more extensive visualization you can think of all human beings follow you to make praises to Buddha as offerings. When you make an eulogy of ocean of excellent qualities that makes you feel delighted.

The next section shows how to pay homage with the body to the Three Jewels.

[2:24] To the Buddhas of the past, the present, and all future time,

And to the Dharma and Sublime Assembly,

With bodies many as the grains of dust

Upon the earth, I will prostrate and bow.

When you make a prostration you can do the same visualization as before that all human beings doing it by your lead. Also offer it to all Buddhas. You can also think of all your past lives doing prostration as well. You are not just making prostration to the Buddha alone but to Dharma - to the true path and true realization. In the case of Buddhas, past, present and future.

It is said that if you are able to do prostrations in an extensive manner, you earn extensive results. For example, thinking that all those particles made up your body doing prostration as you prostrate.

Making prostration to the generation of Bodhicitta in mentioned in stanza 2:25.

[2:25] To shrines and all supports

Of bodhicitta I bow down:

All abbots who transmit the vows, to every learned master,

And to all sublime practitioners of Dharma.

What is meant by supporting generating of bodhicitta? In Mahayana, sutra baskets are supports of Bodhicitta. We can see images of Buddha to generate bodhicitta by looking at beautiful features of Buddha.

Next we make offerings to abbots and priests in second stanza 2:25. In the context of ordained monks they have to receive vows. One can do prostrations to those vows. Also the teachers or the masters who helped you to be a better person, make prostrations. Lay people take refuge, vows and precepts. We can offer prostrations to those who are on the Path.