

TIBETAN BUDDHISM CENTER FOR WORLD PEACE
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Shantideva's *Bodhicharyavata*, The Way of the Bodhisattva
Introduction to the Text

The following consists of edited and modified excerpts transcribed from a series of talks about the Bodhicharyavatara given by Wulstan Fletcher of the Padmakara Translation Group, presented by the Tsadra Foundation & Shambhala Publications. It also consists of historical background and overviews of the Bodhicharyavatara written by Vesna A. Wallace and B. Alan Wallace.

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Geshe Nima requested we study Shantideva's text following his two month teaching residency at the TBCWP between November 2022 and January 2023.

Preliminary remarks about the particular qualities of the Buddha's teaching

1. Although Buddhism is classified as a religion in the west, it is distinct in that it is not the product of divine revelation.
2. The Buddha—based on his own experience—taught the nature of the self and the nature of phenomena in order to help us understand our experience and to lead us to freedom from suffering. He talked about what phenomena are, how and why phenomena appear, and the structure of the mind, or consciousness (mind and consciousness are synonymous in Buddhism).
3. Even though the implications of the Buddha's teachings are huge, there is nothing about them that is not, in principle, able to be known by us. His teachings are not a mystery.
4. One of the most important statements the Buddha made is that we should not blindly trust anything he said. He didn't say, "Believe in me and I will save you." Rather he said, "Whatever I teach, put it to the test. Try it out. Use your reason and your common sense. If and when you find that it's true, then accept it." This is very liberating for Buddhist practitioners, and shows the total confidence of the Buddha in his own message.
5. It also frees people from depending on the Buddha as a person. The test of the Buddha's teaching is not whether you can prove historically that the Buddha said it, but according to the effects the teaching has on you when you practice it.
6. There are many aspects of the Buddha's teaching that can be used independently of the Buddhist tradition itself. For example, the teachings of the Buddha on psychology and the emotions, or the importance of practicing mindfulness. These can be helpful or useful to non-buddhists of other religions, or no religion at all. This has become quite common in America, and there's no reason to think the Buddha would be unhappy about it.
7. However, Buddhist techniques that are being applied outside of the Buddhist tradition can be used for different reasons and objectives. If these techniques are being used to improve one's ordinary experience of cyclic existence—to enhance cyclic existence and make it more

comfortable, then you can be sure this was not what the Buddha intended. Quite the opposite. The Buddha's teachings were aimed at undermining precisely those ways of clinging to phenomena and mental states which bind us in a state of unhappiness and dissatisfaction, which is the very nature of cyclic existence. The Buddha's teaching is not about creating some kind of utopian society within cyclic existence. Instead it's helping us to pull back from the kinds of social and psychological structures that actually produce more problems than they solve.

8. When we study the text of the *Bodhicharyavatara* we are going to find many aspects of it that do not sit well with our modern attitudes. It will be a challenge, because from a contemporary point of view there's a measure of political incorrectness in the text. There are things that challenge our view of what a person is, what society is, what relationships are about. So it's a good idea to approach these aspects of the text with an attitude of questioning and examination. As the Buddha said, "You don't have to believe anything I say. Put it to the test and see if it works for you."

Historical background to the text

1. When the Indian Buddhist scholar Atisha was living in Tibet in the 11th-century he received a message from India that the master Shantipa (a.k.a. Ratnakarashanti), who was one of Atisha's teachers at Vikramashila monastic university, had died. When Atisha heard this he burst into tears and wept. His disciples asked him why he was so upset, and he said, "In the whole of India at this time there are only two people who can tell the difference between the Buddhist view and the Hindu view. One was Shantipa and the other is me." In other words, it was at a time in India when Hinduism and Buddhism were in a state of high development and there had been a lot of cross-pollination. There were many similarities which made it difficult for people to discern what the true Buddhist view was.

2. We're reaching that position now in the West between Buddhism and the New Age movement's philosophy where there's a lot of cross-pollination, and there are a lot of similarities in some things. But it's only by studying texts like the *Bodhicharyavatara* that we will understand the difference between the Buddhist view and its appropriation by other contemporary philosophies and practices that, though well-intentioned, are somewhat vague.

3. That's an important point to bear in mind when approaching Shantideva's text. What he has to say is sometimes not what we want to hear. Nevertheless it is important to take it in and to take account of it, even if you don't accept it in the end.

Shantideva's Life

1. Shantideva, an 8th-century Indian Buddhist monk, is among the most renowned and esteemed figures in the entire history of Mahayana Buddhism. According to two brief accounts of his life from Tibetan sources, he was born into a royal family and was destined for the throne. But on the verge of his coronation, Manjushri, a divine embodiment of wisdom, and Tara, a divine embodiment of compassion, both appeared to him in dreams and counseled him not to ascend to the throne. So he left his father's kingdom, retreated to the wilderness, and devoted himself to meditation. During this time, he achieved advanced states of *samadhi* (a profoundly high level of meditative concentration) and various *siddhis* (paranormal abilities and

attainments), and from that time on he constantly had visions of Manjushri, who guided him as his spiritual mentor.

Sometime after his stay in the wilderness, he made his way to the renowned monastic university of Nalanda in northeast India, where he took monastic ordination and devoted himself to the thorough study of the Madhyamaka philosophy, Buddhist *sutras* and *tantras*, and composed several works. But as far as his fellow monks could see, all he did was eat, sleep, and defecate.

Seeking to humiliate Shantideva and force him to leave the monastery, the other scholars coerced him into reciting a *sutra* before the monastic community and the public at Nalanda's outdoor courtyard, a task they thought far exceeded his abilities. They set up an enormously high lion throne for him to sit on with no steps leading up to the seat, just to add to his humiliation and their amusement. When the time came for the teaching, they were thrown into confusion when they suddenly caught sight of him already sitting on the throne, not knowing how he had managed to get up there.

Shantideva asked them, "Shall I recite an existing text or a new composition?" "Recite something new!" they told him, and in response he began chanting the *Bodhicharyavatara*. During this astonishing recital, the deity Manjushri appeared in the sky and many of the people there saw him and had great faith. When Shantideva came to the beginning of stanza 34 of the ninth chapter, which says, "When the true existence of phenomena and the true existence of emptiness no longer appear to the mind, the mind becomes perfectly peaceful and free of concepts," (which is actually the key to the Madhyamaka teaching), at that point he and Manjushri began to rise higher and higher into the sky until at last they disappeared. Shantideva's voice, however, continued to resound so that the transmission was completed.

Different versions of this work were recorded by his listeners, and they could not come to a consensus as to which was the most accurate. Eventually, the scholars of Nalanda learned that Shantideva had come to dwell in the Kalinga region to the south, and they journeyed there to ask him to return to the university. Although he declined, he told them which of the versions of the *Bodhicharyavatara* was true to his words.

After that, Shantideva retreated to a monastery in a forest filled with wildlife. During this time, Shantideva is said to have displayed his amazing *siddhis*. Eventually, he renounced the signs of monkhood and wandered about India, devoting himself to the service of others.

The spread of the Bodhicharyavatara to Tibet

1. Shantarakshita, the renowned 8th-century Buddhist scholar and abbot of Nalanda, went to Tibet in the latter half of the 8th century at the invitation of the Tibetan king Trisong Detsen to establish Buddhism in Tibet. It's quite likely that Shantideva and Shantarakshita knew each other because of their Nalanda connection.

2. When Shantarakshita went to Tibet in 763, he set into motion the whole process of translating Sanskrit texts into Tibetan—all the ancient sutras and commentaries that were available—and in that first dissemination of Buddhism to Tibet, that first period of translation, Shantideva was translated. This shows that his text had become very popular very early on, that it had become a sort of bestseller.

3. This is the translation of the text that we start with, which is preserved in the Tibetan collection of translated treatises called the *Tengyur*, and which has been transmitted through

the centuries by generations of scholars and practitioners who have actually put Shantideva's text to the test of experience and have authenticated it in that way. They have used the teaching of Shantideva and know its truth and effectiveness on the basis of their own experience. And if those of us who receive this teaching from our Tibetan teachers practice in the same way, we will do the same. The origin of the transmission lineage, as far as we practitioners are concerned, is in the Tibetan translation. Even though Shantideva has disappeared from view, his voice still resounds through the Tibetan transmission lineage, and his voice is authenticated by the experience of the practitioners.

4. Later on in the 11th century, during the second dissemination of Buddhism to Tibet, the text was revised and completed according to a longer Sanskrit text. A very important figure in this process was the great master Atisha. He was the one who, after the collapse of Buddhism in Tibet following the persecution of Buddhism by King Langdarma and the collapse of the Tibetan empire, Buddhism gradually reformed, and one of the most important figures in this was Atisha. Atisha was invited to Tibet precisely to refound the Buddhist tradition, and he founded what has come to be called the Kadampa tradition. The Kadampas had six particularly important texts, one of which was the *Bodhicharyavatara*, the *Way of the Bodhisattva*.

The Buddhist Path

The Three Scopes

1. Mahayana Buddhism fits within an understanding and framework of the entire path of the Dharma called the *lamrim* ("stages of the path") that became common in Tibet following Atisha's influence. Spiritual practitioners can be divided into three groups—what are called the three kinds of beings or the three scopes. This is important for us to think about because it is a way of actually understanding where we are personally within this framework.

2. The three scopes have to do with happiness, what you consider to be happiness, what sort of happiness you're looking for. Or from the opposite point of view, what you're afraid of. From a Mahayana Buddhist perspective, if you're talking about a spiritual path, you're talking about a path which includes a future existence—not just this material existence we presently experience. The beings who are on the first scope are those who understand happiness in the ordinary sense of the word—that is to say, a fortunate rebirth as a human or something higher like a god, and the avoidance of an unfortunate rebirth as a wild animal or something lower like an insatiable ghost or worse. In this first scope, according to the Buddha, the karmic principle driving our experience is ethics, the way we behave. The teachings that are given on the first scope tell us how to create the causes of happiness in the ordinary sense of the word. If we're looking for happiness, or salvation, or rebirth in the higher realms of cyclic existence, or *samsara*, this is the way to go. We must understand what we should do and what we shouldn't do. It's an ethical teaching. So the tone of the first scope teachings is about the kind of ethical behavior that produces happiness. This is the part of Buddhism that is similar to other religious practices and systems. By and large, religion has to do with the production of happiness in this life and the hereafter, on the basis of a continuing identity of the person or the soul.

3. Buddhism kind of goes along with that up to a point, but the distinctive characteristics of Buddhism really kick in with the second scope. Instead of being satisfied with happiness in the ordinary sense of the word, second scope practitioners feel that the ups and downs of samsaric

'happiness' are suboptimal. Birth in the higher realms is unsatisfactory because it is impermanent. The attitude of the beings of the second scope is not just to have higher rebirths in samsara, but to get out of samsara completely. In order to do that, one has to understand the root cause of samsara, which is clinging to a self. So from the second scope onward, we have the kind of Buddhism that is not shared with other spiritual traditions. The main feature of the beings of the second scope is they want to leave samsara, they want to get away from suffering and its causes decisively, and they want to get away for themselves alone—a kind of solitary nirvana.

4. The beings of the third scope are those who are concerned not only with their own suffering, but the suffering of others. They therefore wish to attain the spiritual capacity that will allow them to place other beings in a state of perfect happiness.

5. If you want to look at it from the point of view of fear—what you're afraid of, a person of the first scope is afraid of suffering in the lower realms of samsara. A person of the second scope is afraid of samsara itself. Beings of the third scope are afraid of the self-centered wish for happiness for one's own sake alone. Therefore they are afraid of not having *bodhicitta*, the wish to attain enlightenment for the purpose of freeing others.

6. If you take it a step further to those Mahayana practitioners who are on the Vajrayana, or Tantric path, their object of fear is what is called ordinariness—or ordinary appearance, because they're interested in what is called pure vision, in which the whole of phenomenal existence is completely transformed.

7. So if you think, *What stage am I at in all of this?* it's an interesting question to ask. If you look at it from Atisha's point of view, he would say that if you identify as a Mahayana practitioner you must have the basis of the Hinayana practice, and in order to have that Hinayana basis you must have the possibility of practicing, therefore you must have a fortunate rebirth, preferably human. So the third scope encompasses the second scope, which encompasses the first. Whereas it's not true the other way around. You can be satisfied with the first scope or the second (as a Hinayana Buddhist you don't aspire to Mahayana).

8. When we look at ourselves honestly we have to ask *what are we afraid of?* Are we really afraid of samsara as such? Are we really afraid of the self-centered attitude of just wanting happiness for oneself? All of us probably have the basic fear of the first scope. As for the rest, it's up to each individual's path. One of the things that comes across in many of the mind training teachings is that it is essentially a secret. It's not something other people can see in you. It's something that is a characteristic of your own path. Shantideva, when he talks about the exchange of self and other, says "accomplish this sacred mystery." Or when you look at the "Eight Verses of Mind Training" by Langri Tangpa, when he talks about taking on the suffering of other beings he says, "We do it in secret." It's not something that anybody can see. So you can be in a crowd of people and there may be lots of bodhisattvas there, but you have no idea. Or you may be in a whole monastery of people among all sorts of practitioners and there may not really be a bodhisattva there at all. You just don't know. All you know is what you yourself are doing.

9. This is a very important principle because it's only that, which really changes our life. It's only that, which will protect us when we have to face death—the degree that we ourselves are established in the Buddhadharma, refuge, and bodhicitta.

Why the Buddha decided to teach

1. Another thing we should note is that when the Buddha attained enlightenment he said, “I have discovered something which is so profound and so subtle, that I can't hope to explain it to anybody. No one will understand this. I will just meditate in the forest until my form aggregate has reached exhaustion.” At which point the gods appeared and said, “No there are people in cyclic existence who are not sound asleep, that you may be able to coax into awareness and wisdom. Please set forth the teaching.” So the Buddha agreed and said, “To those who wish to hear, the doors of deathlessness stand open.” So he went to Sarnath to teach his first disciples.

2. It's very interesting what he did at that point. He didn't proclaim, “This is my wisdom, this is what I've discovered.” He didn't attempt to dazzle anybody. He said, “You have a problem. The problem is that you're suffering. I have a way where you can find a solution to this problem.” He didn't say, “You poor beings are wandering in samsara. You are bad, you are unworthy. You're making all kinds of mistakes.” The Buddha never condemned anyone for being in samsara. He said, “There's nothing wrong with being in samsara, except that you don't like it. You're suffering, and there's something we can do to fix that.”

3. When one is practicing Buddhism, when one is trying to understand the teachings and put them into practice, it's never a question of feeling that we're special, that we are somehow superior. It's not. Neither is it a question of spreading the word. Because people don't necessarily want to hear what the Buddha had to say, and that's fine. Eventually they will. Eventually suffering beings will come to the point that they will actually wish to be free from it. At that point, they themselves will ask for teachings, and at that point the teachings can be given. Otherwise, it's a waste of time.

An overview of the *Bodhicharyavatara* text

The three stages of bodhicitta

1. Turning now to the *Bodhicharyavatara*, in the commentaries to the Tibetan text, what the commentators often do is quote a stanza from Nagarjuna which says: *May bodhicitta, precious and sublime, arise where it has not yet come to be. And where it is arisen, may it never fail, but grow and flourish ever more and more.* So there are three stages: 1) may it arise where it has not yet come to be; 2) where it is arisen, may it never fail; and 3) may it continue to intensify until the goal is reached.

2. According to the commentators they say the *Bodhicharyavatara* can be divided according to these three stages. Chapters one, two, and three: “The Excellence of Bodhichitta”, “Confession”, and “Taking Hold of Bodhichitta”, are about causing bodhicitta to arise where it has not yet come to be. Chapters four, five, and six: “Carefulness”, “Vigilant Introspection”, and “Patience”, are geared toward preventing bodhicitta from deteriorating. And chapters seven, eight, and nine: “Diligence”, “Meditative Concentration”, and “Wisdom” are geared to the intensification of the experience of bodhicitta.

The six perfections

1. Additionally, the thematic structure of the *Bodhicharyavatara* is based on the six perfections, or *paramitas*. These are: generosity, ethical discipline, patience, enthusiastic effort, meditative concentration, and wisdom. They are the framework for the Bodhisattva's path to enlightenment.

2. The first three chapters, “The Excellence of Bodhicitta”, “Confession”, and “Taking Hold of Bodhicitta”, discuss the benefits of bodhicitta, the awakened mind that motivates the Bodhisattva way of life, and explain the means of cultivating and sustaining this altruistic aspiration. Those topics lay the foundation for the *perfection of generosity*.

3. The fourth and fifth chapters, “Carefulness” and “Vigilant Introspection”, discuss the means of implementing bodhicitta in daily life and thereby address the *perfection of ethical discipline*.

4. Chapters six (“Patience”), seven (“Diligence”), and eight (“Meditative Concentration”) set forth the perfections of patience, enthusiastic effort, and meditative concentration, respectively. The sixth chapter, “Patience”, is widely considered a classic in its own right, for it presents a broad array of contemplations designed to counteract hatred, which is seen in the Mahayana as the most destructive of all the mental afflictions and the one most antithetical to the Bodhisattva way of life.

5. The eighth chapter, “Meditative Concentration”, is concerned with the perfection of meditation, and has for its main theme the cultivation of altruism and bodhicitta, which embraces all beings, regardless of gender or species, with love and compassion. The implication here is that insofar as one is free of self-centered craving for such things as sensual gratification, honor, and wealth, one is primed for the successful cultivation of genuine altruism.

6. The ninth chapter, “Wisdom”, addresses the perfection of wisdom, and is one of the primary expositions in the Indian Buddhist tradition of the Prasangika Madhyamaka view, which is in accord with the writings of Buddhapalita and Chandrakirti. The characteristic theme of this school is that all phenomena are devoid of any independent self-existing nature, for they exist purely by the power of conceptual imputation. In other words, the conceptual consciousness falsely projects an independent self-existent nature onto all phenomena, including the self.

Chapter 1: “The Excellence of Bodhicitta”

1. Shantideva starts by talking about the excellence of bodhicitta—what a wonderful thing the way of the bodhisattva is, the practice of what is called bodhicitta. He goes through a whole list of stanzas in which he explains the benefits of bodhicitta. For instance, anyone who truly has bodhicitta and who dies in the state of bodhicitta can never fall into the lower realms. It is a perfect protection. For people who are weighed down by their negativities, to have bodhicitta is like being accompanied by a strong man, a kind of god who protects them. Bodhicitta has this extraordinary benefit of helping you from falling to the lower realms. He says that even somebody who is suffering in the dungeons and prisons of samsara in the worst possible situations of total deprivation and depravity that we can imagine, if in the mind of that person the thought of bodhicitta takes birth, they are totally transformed and become a child of the Conqueror, an heir of the Buddha, worshipful to gods and humankind.

2. In other words, he tries to whip up a feeling of enthusiasm. This is quite useful, because even a person who is in the first scope—who wants to escape suffering, who doesn't want to go to the lower realms—even a person on that level can start to have an aspiration to this extraordinary idea of bodhicitta. We can begin to appreciate the idea, even if we can't do any of the practices that Shantideva describes. Nevertheless, we can have an interest and devotion, a reverence for this teaching. That itself is an enormous step forward. Because in order to get anything you have to want it—it's important to want it. Actually, that's the most important first step.

3. Therefore, in this first chapter Shantideva says there are two kinds of bodhicitta. There's an aspirational bodhicitta and a bodhicitta of engagement. They are both immensely important. Of course, the bodhicitta of engagement is even greater than the bodhicitta of aspiration. And so it's clear that even if we are not particularly good at practicing or meditation, we can all have this aspiration. We can all be bodhisattvas in aspiration. This class of beings can include us. Aspirational bodhicitta, which is something we have to cultivate, is the protection that Shantideva is talking about.

Chapter 2: “Confession”

Merit/Sonam

4. He then goes on to say that now that we're interested in bodhicitta—interested in this path, what do we do in order to set out upon it? He says there are certain preliminaries and preparatory practices, and these are the subjects that are described in the second and third chapters. In order for bodhicitta to take birth we have to have what's usually translated as “merit”. Merit is a tricky word. It's a translation of the Tibetan word, *sonam*. The trouble with the English word “merit” is that it can have connotations of being something that makes you deserving of a reward for being some kind of special person. *Sonam* is actually its own reward. It's a kind of positive energy that is generated in one's own heart/mind on the basis of certain kinds of actions, certain kinds of attitudes. In general, they are the activities that draw you away from ego-clinging and selfishness which lie at the heart of the samsaric problem. This being so, even animals can generate *sonam*. The mother chicken looking after her chick, for instance. Granted, she's probably completely dominated by the power of instinct. Even so, she is doing something to protect and sustain another being, and this is a good thing—*sonam* positive energy that is generated in her own heart/mind. Obviously at the level of human beings this can be much greater and more powerful. And it is in proportion to the *sonam* that accumulates in a mind stream, that the appearances of the Dharma occur in the outer world. Hanging prayer flags is an example of just one way of accumulating *sonam*, or merit. It's a way of doing something which draws you into the Dharma.

5. The interesting thing about the idea of *sonam* is that ultimately it is based on the notion of buddha nature, which is implicit in every mind stream, but which is hidden. Buddha nature is a sort of hidden treasure which is covered by the different veils of obscurations. As *sonam* starts to accumulate, the veils of the obscurations start to get a little thinner. And as a result, the appearances of the Dharma arise in the outside world. There will be a time, a historical point in a given mind stream when, for the first time, they hear the word “Buddha” or see a Buddha image; where they see a Buddhist text or something like that. And gradually these appearances

of the Dharma will become stronger and stronger, and clearer and clearer. A being will eventually reach a point, by being born in the human world, where they can actually encounter the Dharma as a teaching— where the ideas of the Dharma can be absorbed into the mind so that the mind is transformed. Eventually, they will meet a person who is able to place them in the true nature of the mind, someone who we call a root guru, or root lama. The appearances of the Dharma and your accumulated positive energy potential—your *sonam*, will eventually meet. That’s when the understanding, the realization, occurs.

6. Shantideva says specifically that in order for bodhicitta to occur, we must generate this positive energy of *sonam*. He says one of the best ways of generating *sonam* is to make offerings. So the beginning of the second chapter is about making offerings. A lot of the offerings he makes are purely imaginary: the beauty of nature, and so on. That’s quite interesting because the fact that you can perceive a beautiful world is an indication of the *sonam* in your heart and mind stream. It’s actually thanks to your *sonam* in your heart that you perceive the beauty of the sunset. So when you offer the beauty of the sunset you’re offering something that is very personal to you.

Confession/shakpa

7. Then he goes on in this chapter to confession. This is also an important point to take on board. Because again, the word “confession” is problematic. It carries with it the idea of confessing something that we have done that is bad, that we are guilty of. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, we’re asking for forgiveness to absolve us of our sins. In this chapter, what Shantideva does is invoke the presence of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas and then he declares, “This is what I’m like.” He doesn’t ask them to forgive him. What he’s doing is he’s saying, “I bring this into conscious awareness, I own it as being myself, and I decide to change.” And it’s in the presence of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas that this new direction takes place. That’s what confession is in Buddhism. The word in Tibetan for confessing a wrongdoing and making amends for it is *shakpa*, which means to split or to cut. The idea is that you are cutting or splitting off from a trajectory that you’ve been following all this time and that you’re going to change. The important feature is not only bringing into consciousness your negativities—your sins, but also deciding you’re going to stop doing them and change your direction. That’s *shakpa*.

The four opponent powers

8. Bringing into consciousness your regrettable negative actions and the resolved decision that you’re going to change, are two of what are called the “four opponent powers”, which actually act to purify the mind stream. The four opponent powers are regret, reliance, remedy, and resolve—the four R’s. First, in the presence of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas you *regret* your negative actions that have harmed not only others, but yourself, and that are so disturbing to your state of mind. Then, because you’ve committed these negative actions in relation to either enlightened beings or sentient beings, your *reliance* is on them as the basis for purifying those negative actions, just as when you fall on the ground you rely on the ground to get up again. Therefore, the *remedy* is to engage in altruistic positive actions of body, speech and mind that are beneficial to sentient beings and in accord with enlightened beings. Finally, you *resolve* to stop any self-centered negative actions of body, speech, and mind that are harmful to sentient beings and contradict the teachings of the enlightened beings.

So in the second chapter, Shantideva generates *sonam*/merit and through the process of *shakpa*/confession, he puts an end to a way of behaving that he wants to stop, because he wants to change direction.

Chapter 3: “Taking Hold of Bodhicitta”

1. Then, in the third chapter, he follows the generation of *sonam*/merit and *shakpa*/confession with other practices which Buddhist practitioners will recognize as parts of the seven-branch, or seven-limb practice: rejoicing, requesting the lamas to teach, requesting the Buddhas to remain, and so forth. The third chapter comes to a climax where he actually takes a vow. He says, “Just as all the Buddhas of the past have brought forth the awakened mind, and in the precepts of the bodhisattvas, step by step abode and trained, likewise for the benefit of beings, I will bring to birth the awakened mind and in those precepts, step by step, I will abide and train myself.” This text of Shantideva’s is now used very often as the text for the taking of the bodhisattva vow. It’s still on the level of aspirational bodhicitta—it brings to perfection aspirational bodhicitta. He then finishes this chapter with a wonderful celebration of all that’s happened to him.

Chapter 4: “Carefulness”

1. Now we move on to the ways in which bodhicitta can be kept from deteriorating—how it can be protected. The importance of this lies in the fact that for people like ourselves, we can have this wonderful idea. We can meet the Dharma and we can receive teachings. But the frightening thing is, we can lose it. It can drain away. It’s like somebody who is on the surface of a river—if they’re not actually moving forward, and just treading water, the river itself will take them downstream. In other words, if we just have this idea and we leave it, we will lose it. This happens. You can find people who have been practicing the Dharma for years, who’ve done multiple retreats, and at the end of their life they’ve forgotten it. They’re left empty-handed. They have to face death with the same amount of confusion as if they’d never practiced.

2. So if we’re interested in this practice, it’s something we really have to take on board. We can’t just leave things, we have to keep going forward. It’s becomes a question of gravity in the end. If you let a ball drop out of your hand it will fall to the ground. If we leave our minds to their own devices, we will degenerate, no doubt about it. So once we’ve met this incredible teaching, we mustn’t let it go. It’s like a blind man who happens to get hold of a cow’s tail—a cow’s tail is going here, there, and everywhere. If he loses it the chances of him catching hold of that tail again are pretty slim. So we mustn’t let go.

3. This 4th chapter is about carefulness, and it’s a reflection on the consequences of just letting things slide. It’s at this particular point in the text that Shantideva for the first time starts to frighten us. He tries to scare us with the idea of the possibility and the reality of falling into lower realms of existence. Death is something that none of us can escape. It’s a terrible thing to see somebody die in fear and confusion. On the other hand, it’s a wonderful thing to see somebody die peacefully, because they have used their life well, they don’t have any regret.

4. He uses these ideas to shake us into an awareness of what the situation is. What is it that makes our mind degenerate? Therefore he brings up the idea of defilements, sometimes called the afflictions or afflictive emotions—the kinds of things that pollute the mind, which can be very strong. Habits of anger, habits of lust, habits of dishonesty, cheating, arrogance, and so on,

that we all have because we're human beings. We carry them with us in our mind stream. And yet he says when you're trying to shake an old habit it can be very difficult because the habit is so ingrained. He says, yes, it's true, but you mustn't give up. And the reason you mustn't give up is because actually the defilements are quite easy to get rid of if you know how.

5. He says defilements are only ideas. They're just thoughts. If you learn to recognize these thoughts you can dissipate them with the view of wisdom. He says, "Miserable defilements, scattered by the eye of wisdom! Where will you now run, when driven from my mind? Whence will you return to do me harm?" Because, he says, if you've got an ordinary enemy you can chase him out of the state, but he will gather his forces and come back. But once you've pushed this habit out of your mind, there's nowhere for it to go, because it's a mental event. It just actually disappears.

6. He says, "Defilements are not in the object, nor within the faculties, nor somewhere in between. And if not elsewhere, where is their abode, when they inflict their havoc on the world? They are simple mirages, and so take heart. Banish all your fear. Strive to know their nature. Why suffer needlessly the pains of hell?" There's no need to fall, provided you understand how to deal with defilement.

Chapter 5: "Vigilant Introspection"

1. This idea is taken up again in the next chapter, which is on vigilant introspection. Shantideva says once you've reorganized yourself, got your act together, and you've embarked with this aspirational bodhicitta, and once you understand the nature of defilements—this is how to behave if you want to keep a grip on the cow's tail.

2. He talks about a "mental spy", the capacity of the mind to look into itself and see what's going on. An enhanced awareness of your own secret mental state that nobody else can see but you. Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, a great teacher of Dzogchen meditation, said this chapter is actually a pointing-out instruction. In the Dzogchen tradition (which is similar to Mahamudra meditation) the master points out the nature of the mind and helps the disciple into it. He does so by showing the way the mind is, how thoughts arise and dissolve. Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche said this 5th chapter is a very good and useful introduction to Dzogchen.

3. It is here that Shantideva gives us all sorts of helpful tips. You cultivate a habit of being present to what's going on in your mind. Of course you can't do that right away. It implies all the teachings on Shamatha meditation, calm-abiding, sitting meditation, where you create a kind of space in your mind so that you don't immediately react to situations. You develop the capacity to be aware of what's going on. And, even if it's only a short time, to decide what you're going to do about it.

4. It's in this chapter that he gives what is called the "log" teaching. He says when you see pride coming up, when you want to be fishing for praise, when you want to do something to get your reputation on the rise, when you feel disdainful toward somebody, when you feel like reacting angrily—be like a log, a log of wood. Just close down. Don't do anything. Keep it inside. Don't act. But look at its nature, look at the thing that's arising in the mind.

5. This is the first time in this text that we find a separation forming between mind and body, which is very characteristic of Buddha's teaching. It's something that's new to a lot of people coming from a Western background. If they're coming from, for instance, an orthodox Christian point of view (which is quite influenced by Aristotle on a philosophical level), they think of the body and soul as being a unit, that death is an artificial separation, and that the two will come together on the last day, the resurrection of the body. This is also a feature of certain kinds of Judaism. The belief in the Rapture, which is popular in America, has to do with this idea that the mind and body are somehow fused. Whereas in Buddhism this is not so.

6. Buddhism accepts the body as vitally important, but it is something that is an object of the mind's consciousness. The mind is primary. It is the mind that becomes enlightened. The bodies that the enlightened mind may have, are something different from the physical body that we seem to have in our present existence. The body can be analyzed by the mind so that we can see that it's not the solid, individual thing that we thought it was. And it's certainly not our identity. For that reason, we can detach from it. It doesn't have to be so important. This is also very different from the materialistic attitude that is very prevalent in the West where the only reality is matter and that the mind—consciousness—is a secondary mental phenomenon that is caused by the brain and goes with it. This is quite different from what Buddhism says. According to Buddhism, matter is more like a phenomenon that is a mere appearance of the mind.

7. With this chapter on vigilant introspection Shantideva really emphasizes the necessity of being mentally present to what's going on—to keep a grip on the way we behave. That's another way to stop the mind from degenerating and from going in the wrong direction. In this chapter there are all the teachings on mindfulness which is very important in Buddhism and which is proving very useful for non-Buddhists also. It is a way of solving many problems in ordinary life and learning how to live well.

Chapter 6: "Patience"

1. In the 6th chapter, which is on patience, Shantideva addresses what is the greatest danger of all, and that is the problem of anger. Again, anger is not an entirely satisfactory translation, because there are occasions where a certain kind of anger is actually an appropriate response to certain kinds of situations. Indignation against injustice, for instance. Or as a parent you might put on a show of anger to scare your child into doing the right thing. But that's not the kind of destructive, hateful anger that Shantideva is talking about. The real defilement of anger is an attitude of mind which wishes to destroy. It is the worst of all the three poisons (anger, attachment, and ignorance) because that's what it does: it ends in death and destruction. Desire or attachment, which is another poison, is not quite so bad because at least when you desire something you want to preserve it. You don't destroy it. That doesn't mean to say that desire is a good thing, but it's not as bad as anger. So Shantideva says that just one moment of anger is enough to destroy all the *sonam* merit that's been gathered in a mind stream for a very long period of time. It's definitely something that we can't afford to let happen.

2. Therefore, the real task at hand is to find out what it is that provokes anger and to get rid of it. He says that one of the main things that causes anger is unhappiness. Discontent. Things that happen to you that you don't like. Unpleasant things that happen to you. Unpleasant things that happen to people that you like. Pleasant things that happen to people that you don't like, and so

on. So you have to take the trouble to look at these different sources of anger, and to deal with them. Because you can't afford to have anger erupt in this completely uncontrolled and destructive way.

3. There are many things in this chapter that are quite a challenge to us, because we find Shantideva saying things that don't quite fit our ideas of guilt, responsibility, retaliation, justice. For instance he says that one way to deal with anger is to look at the person who's attacking you and to realize that they're not responsible for what they're doing. That they are doing this to you because of negative emotions, defilements that are happening to them.

4. So he says when somebody hits you with a stick, you're normally not angry with the stick, you're angry with the person who holds the stick. According to this example, the person who is attacking you is the stick and that which is holding the stick are this person's negative emotions. The problem is the negative emotions of that person, not the person themselves. That's a kind of invitation to free up the situation a little bit and to see that people are not intrinsically enemies. They're not intrinsically hateful or intrinsically hostile.

5. The question is, why are they hostile to me? And then there comes the answer, it's because of your karma, your relationship to this person. Shantideva, and the mind training texts in general, tend to say that when you are attacked, it's like an echo coming from a cliff towards the person who first shouted. Of course this is very simplistic because the question of karma is immensely complicated. But just for the sake of argument, Shantideva says it's like this person is attacking me because in the past at some stage—maybe not the immediate past, maybe very far in the past—my mind stream did something that caused suffering in this other mind stream. It's like the weapon that you first used to attack that other being is now turned back and is attacking you.

6. This brings up a very uncomfortable question about responsibility. The big challenge is to see that in any kind of conflicted situation—however terrible, however appalling—karma is at work. There are no innocent victims in samsara. We are aware that people are abused, that apparently innocent people are abused, and the question is, why does this happen? If you say it just happens, then you're saying it's just chance. That means it's chaotic. But the whole doctrine of karma is to show that there is a pattern in things. Once you understand that, you realize that you can do something about it. When you understand the doctrine of karma you can actually change the situation with regard to one's future existences.

7. It's very important to see that the doctrine of karma is a kind of completely impersonal law. It's not a matter of retribution. It's not a matter of rewards and punishments. This is quite new to people coming from the Judeo-Christian tradition where the moral law is understood in terms of a divine law which is either obeyed or disobeyed, and that what happens to you afterwards—if you've done something bad—is a punishment. This is not at all the Buddhist doctrine. It's completely foreign to the Buddhist idea of karma.

8. If somebody jumps out of an airplane without a parachute, hits the ground, and is smashed and killed, we would say this is a terrible thing. We wouldn't say that the person who smashes

against the ground is being punished for jumping out of the plane. We would say it's a consequence, an example of cause and effect. That's what karma is all about—cause and effect.

9. So when we find ourselves being attacked by somebody, once again Shantideva says this person is attacking us because we have called them to do so through our actions in the past. It is a consequence of something that we did, and that is all there is to it. It's not a question of guilt. It's not a question of retribution. It's completely automatic, like gravity.

10. This is something that Shantideva goes into in some detail in the patience chapter. The fact is, in a situation of conflict it helps to see that the person in front of you that is attacking is not your intrinsic enemy. Nobody is intrinsically hostile. They are hostile because of a very complicated network of causes and conditions and circumstances. That's another way of learning how to not respond with uncontrolled anger when we're attacked. To take a step back and deal with it, without losing it.

11. The challenge is, that because of our perceptions and because of our emotions, we respond to situations emotionally. So if we take the situation of a child being abused or killed, it's horrible and we respond with anger and grief. We want that wicked person to be punished or to be removed. Why? Because this is an innocent, defenseless child. And of course that's true, in a way—in this lifetime. But from a Buddhist point of view, when we look at a baby or a child, we're not looking at someone who's inherently a child. We're looking at a being that has come from countless lifetimes before. The person that comes into this life as a baby is not young. This person is ancient. From that point of view, everybody in samsara is the same age. It's just that our bodies happen to be at different stages. That idea is a way of breaking out of the stereotypes that we often fall into because we are taken in by appearances, by the bodies that we can see.

12. Once we understand this idea of karma, the rest of this difficult patience chapter falls into place. Learning to deal with anger, and learning to practice patience is the main way of preventing bodhicitta from declining. So it's a really important practice for those of us on the path.

Chapter 7: “Diligence” (or Heroic Perseverance)

1. We then move on to the third section, which is geared toward intensifying our experience of bodhicitta, and which consists of the 7th chapter on “Diligence” (or Heroic Perseverance), the 8th chapter on “Meditative Concentration”, and the 9th chapter on “Wisdom”. Although the Wisdom chapter comes at the end, where Shantideva talks in general terms about what has come to be known as Madhyamaka, a difficult Buddhist philosophy, nevertheless the basic insights of Madhyamaka are constantly present throughout the text of *The Way of the Bodhisattva*. Many of the arguments that he uses are based on the idea that the self is not a real existent thing, or that the whole possibility of exchanging oneself with another is based on an understanding of emptiness. But it's in the 9th chapter that he formally goes through the doctrine of Madhyamaka.

2. When we get to the 7th chapter, which is “Diligence”, or “Heroic Perseverance”, diligence is the translation of the Tibetan word *tsöndrö* and “Heroic Perseverance” is the translation of the Sanskrit word *virya*. *Tsöndrö* is related to the ideas of enthusiasm and effort, and *Virya* is

connected with our word “virile” or “virtue” or “virago” (a strong woman). So diligence refers to a capacity to enthusiastically carry on in the face of difficulties, not to turn back. This is where the whole notion of heroism comes into *The Way of the Bodhisattva*. Someone who is fearless. This brings the idea of bravery and courage into the path.

3. Once again, Shantideva says if we’re going to do this, we have to identify the obstacles to this kind of enthusiastic and courageous diligence. The main obstacle to diligence is laziness, which he defines as an inclination towards non-virtue, defeatism, and self-contempt. When we talk about laziness we usually think I can’t be bothered to do something or it’s too difficult, I want to rest. But from a Buddhist point of view, it’s all those things that draw you away from the practice, especially the feeling that you can’t do it, feeling that you’re no good. This is actually a form of laziness as far as Shantideva is concerned. That’s quite an interesting reflection. We often get feelings of dejection and discouragement, and Shantideva basically says, like everything else this is just a thought, a state of mind, and you can shake yourself out of it. He says even insects will eventually gain Buddhahood. Somebody like you, who has so much going for them, you can actually carry on. All you need to do is to understand the situation you are in and to take heart.

4. He goes on to say it’s like a taste for idleness, a craving for sleep, no qualms about the sorrows of samsara, feeling that things are not that bad—that lead to inactivity and laziness. All those things have to be removed.

5. In the beginning of this diligence chapter, Shantideva really cranks up his message about the urgency of the situation. The fact that we have got this human opportunity and that it is so difficult to find, that it is so easy to lose. It’s so easy to fall. Many people think, well, I’m a human being, I’m doing okay, I’ve met the teachings, I’ve got a good lama. I’m okay, everything’s alright. But as the Dalai Lama says, for somebody who doesn’t make the effort, there’s not much you can do for them on their deathbed. Your guru can’t do anything. He can’t liberate you from samsara if you haven’t generated the causes. We mustn’t lull ourselves into a false sense of security and think that we can let things slide.

6. Shantideva says death is soon to come, you risk losing everything, so get your act together and make sure that you don’t lose this situation. You’ve got to create the causes for high rebirth, create the causes for renunciation, create the causes for bodhicitta. To keep from falling, the teachings say you have to stop your negativities, you have to accumulate as much merit as you can, and above all you must make aspirations. When you’re in the presence of a stupa, when you’re in the presence of a great master, you silently say, may I never lose this connection, may I never lose the Dharma, may I find it again quickly in my next life, and to do it often—to get used to having that frame of mind. Because that frame of mind is actually a state of refuge. And if you die in a state of refuge you can’t fall.

7. That’s an important thing to remember and Shantideva says in stanza 16, “Do not be downcast, but marshal all your powers. Make an effort. Be the master of yourself.” You can do it, in other words. Then he says, “Practice the equality of self and other, practice the exchange of self and other.” This is the first time in *The Way of the Bodhisattva* that he actually mentions

the practice of engaged bodhicitta, the bodhicitta of engagement. He will talk about it in much greater detail in the 8th chapter.

8. He says you ought to develop a sense of pride, a sense of confidence. There is a pride that is a defilement: arrogance, where you think you're better than other people, where you scorn others and look down on them. But there is also a good kind of pride, which is to say I've got what it takes. If I take one step at a time, I can do it. And he says this is the kind of pride you must cultivate. This pride is not a defilement. This pride is what will carry you through. This feeling of self-confidence that enables you not to give up.

9. He says, "Through the power of bodhicitta former sins are totally consumed and merit, ocean-vast, is gathered in. Mounted on the horse of bodhicitta which puts to flight all mournful weariness, what lucid person could be in despair, proceeding in this way from joy to joy?" Joy seems to be a very characteristic attitude of the bodhisattva, even in the most difficult situations. When you have the compassion of a bodhisattva, not only do you share the suffering of others, you decide that you're going to do something about it. You're going to end suffering. That's an intrinsic element of compassion in the Buddhist sense. So a good sort of pride and self confidence are important elements in diligence, this heroic perseverance.

Chapter 8: Meditative Concentration

1. Then we move on to Meditative Concentration, the 8th chapter. Shantideva talks about the conditions that are conducive to meditative concentration and then talks about what you do with meditative concentration, namely the equalization of self with other and the exchange of self and other.

2. In the first part of the chapter Shantideva talks about the importance of solitude and the importance of practice. You can't deal with all your problems at the time they're happening to you. You have to strengthen yourself in meditation.

3. Then he talks about the kinds of things that work against that solitude, that work against the qualities and situations you need in order to develop your concentration. And, of course, he's talking to a congregation of monks. This text is what Shantideva actually said to them in the courtyard at Nalanda monastic university. So he's talking about their problems as celibate men. In fairly traditional terms for the time, he talks about the problems in getting a mate, wanting a woman, and so forth. And from our present-day point of view it can seem as if he's being offensive toward women. But we have to remember, if it had been a different situation and Shantideva was a female dakini or nun addressing a group of celibate nuns, he would have said the same kinds of things but changed the gender. So nowadays, where we have all sorts of sexual orientations, the reader has to make adjustments according to their own sexual orientation. It's a fairly simple thing to do.

Projecting your desire onto people and possessions

4. He talks about the disgusting aspects of the body and what is it really that you're desiring in that person. It's actually an interesting reflection because when you talk about desire, what happens when you're in that kind of passionate relationship is that you're engaging with something that is a complete mirage. You are actually projecting onto them something that is

coming from inside you, and that's why that person appears to be 100 percent wonderful, 100 percent desirable, and 100 percent beautiful. Anyone who's been in that situation knows that gradually you start to notice things in that person that don't quite fit your projections and you start to withdraw your projections and you see that person more accurately as they are. And then you realize that person is not as 100 percent desirable as you thought they were. That's quite an important point in any relationship because it's at that point when you see the person as that person really is that you can decide to love them. Real love is not a matter of projection, it's a matter of decision. It's something you decide to do. It's at that point that either your relationship breaks up or you decide to carry on.

5. Shantideva goes into that idea, that when you're in love with somebody, when you desire somebody, you're desiring something that isn't actually there. And if you look more closely, you can dismantle your craving for that person through understanding. Which is actually quite important if you're talking to a celibate monk who wants to keep his vows for whatever reason. A person who's living a life of celibacy can suffer a great deal through frustration if they haven't been taught how to deal with desire. So that's quite important and it's something that Shantideva goes into in some detail.

So you give up *desire* for a lover, you give up *attachment* to possessions (which is not necessarily the same thing as giving up a lover, or giving up possessions). He goes into the impermanence of possessions, the instability of the fact that if your happiness is based on what you possess then your happiness is very unstable, because your possessions can very easily fluctuate, you can lose them. All that is very wise advice.

The exchange of self and other

6. Then he moves on to what is really the kernel of the whole text, which is the recognition of the equality of beings, of oneself and other, and that therefore the possibility of exchange with another. When you get into this idea, it has to do again with projection and the way in which we divide up the world. Because we cling to the self, we divide the world into three groups: people or beings that are precious to us, important to us, desirable to us, who we feel are intrinsically important. Then there's the group of people that we don't like, that we'd rather not see, that we don't care for. And then between those two poles there's the whole vast universe of beings we don't know, and aren't important to us, and we don't care about.

7. This division of the world into these three groups is based on our own self-clinging. We talk about my body, my house, my spouse, my children, my job, my town, my country, my species—and these are all important to us *because* we say they're mine. If you see that's what you're doing to the beings of the world—you're dividing them up, and then you try to see it from their point of view, you can see that we're all doing the same thing, that everybody has the same quality. That everybody wants happiness and nobody wants to suffer. So from the point of view of the object, there is no difference in the field of beings. The idea that *my* children are intrinsically special and *others'* children aren't, is just the projection of my own ego. We begin to see that all beings are the same, they're all equally important. Even the ones that we don't like, and all the beings we don't know. We're all in the same predicament.

8. So a very important step in bodhisattva training is to recognize that everybody is the same, irrespective of the way *we* feel about them. We can actually abstract from our own self, and we can say all beings and myself are equal. We all want to be happy, nobody wants to suffer. We can gradually get used to this idea, that beings are the same.

9. Then Shantideva moves on to the next stage and he says if you can step back from yourself and your own interests and problems, your own feelings of self importance, you can turn the tables. Instead of being engrossed in yourself, you can become engrossed in other beings. They can become as important to you as you are to yourself at the moment. He introduces a lot of interesting ideas to generate the feeling of caring, that other beings are precious to you. As this idea begins to take shape and becomes stronger and stronger, the accomplished bodhisattva is able to take on the sufferings of others with joy and enthusiasm. A bodhisattva who reaches that stage can go into the deepest hell in search of beings with the same joy of a swan landing in a lotus lake. It's a beautiful idea. This is important to think about, because if you've embarked on the bodhisattva path, that's your destiny. You will eventually end up like that and you will be willing to come back again and again and again into the sufferings of samsara in order to take others to yourself.

10. The Dalai Lama said when we talk about a Buddha appearing in the world, and someone receiving teachings and achieving enlightenment on the basis of that Buddha, that is all a very complex interdependent network of causes and conditions. They say that many Buddhas have appeared in the history of the world, but here we still are. We weren't able to be saved by them. We didn't take their teachings and we didn't attain enlightenment on the basis of them. And he said it's because there's a karmic connection between the Buddha and the people that can be helped by that Buddha. And he said there are beings in the world, the universes, whom only you can save. And these beings are waiting for your enlightenment to happen. That they can only be saved when you attain Buddhahood and go to find them. This is an amazing thought. There are people waiting for only us. Only we can help them. So that's another idea that can spur our enthusiastic interest in the bodhisattva path.

Chapter 9: "Wisdom"

1. The whole idea of emptiness, the whole idea that the self is a fiction, a center of problems, this whole idea which is central to the Madhyamaka teaching on emptiness has been implicit in the entire text up to this point.

2. All phenomena, including the self, are empty—meaning they are utterly devoid of any independent, self-existent nature—because they exist purely by the power of conceptual imputation. In other words, the deluded conceptual consciousness falsely projects an independent, self-existent nature onto each phenomenon and then believes that is the way that phenomenon exists. In reality, every phenomenon—including the self—is a dependently arising, constantly changing, interdependent phenomenon.

The whole of reality is comprised of two truths: conventional, or relative truth, which consists solely of dependently related events, and ultimate truth, which is the mere absence of any independently self-existing nature of those events.

3. Following a discussion of those two truths, Shantideva presents concise Prasangika critiques of specific views of other Buddhist schools, such as the Yogachara (or Cittamatra) and Vaibhashika, and non-Buddhist schools, such as the Samkhya and Nyaya. He also explains the Prasangika interpretation of the emptiness of the self and phenomena, and the four applications of mindfulness; and he concludes with a variety of arguments in refutation of ‘true’—meaning *inherent, independently self-existing*—existence.

4. If you read Chapter 9 carefully with a good commentary, you will discover amazing depths to this text and this teaching. As the Dalai Lama said, it’s extremely trustworthy—you can trust it. If you take this to heart, death will hold no fear for you, because it’s only a stage in your bodhisattva path. When you take refuge from a Mahayana point of view, you take refuge until you attain enlightenment.

Chapter 10: “Dedication”

1. In the tenth, concluding chapter, Shantideva offers prayers that dedicate the *sonam*/merit, or positive potential, of this work for the benefit of all sentient beings. Here he returns to his initial theme of generosity and bodhicitta—the awakened heart/mind, which pervades this entire treatise.

–Transcribed and Edited by Tenzin Sherab/Christopher Moroney