

TIBETAN BUDDHISM CENTER FOR WORLD PEACE
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Shantideva's *Bodhicharyavatara*, The Way of the Bodhisattva
Chapter 1: "The Excellence of Bodhicitta"

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

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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.

Historical background of the "Khenpo Kunpel" commentary

Before beginning the first chapter of *The Way of the Bodhisattva* it will be helpful to understand a more detailed historical background and context of Khenpo Kunpel's commentary, *The Nectar of Manjushri's Speech*, which will be our main commentarial source.

The first diffusion of Buddhism into Tibet

1. As we said in the last session, the *Bodhicharyavatara* was translated in the first diffusion, or dissemination of Buddhism into Tibet, when Shantarakshita, the great abbot of Nalanda, was invited by the Tibetan king, Trisong Detsen to establish the Dharma in Tibet in the eighth century.

2. Shantarakshita set in motion the great work of translation under royal patronage, and within a few generations an immense quantity of Indian texts had successfully been translated into Tibetan. Shantideva was an older contemporary of Shantarakshita, and the fact that his text was translated in this first diffusion is remarkable because it shows that it had become well known and popular very quickly.

3. Following a succession of several Tibetan kings, in 838 the King Ralpachan was murdered by his brother Langdarma, who was a follower of the early indigenous Bon tradition of Tibet. Langdarma actively suppressed Buddhism in Tibet by dissolving the monasteries, either killing or chasing away the monks, and bringing all Dharma activities to an end. Thanks to the Buddhist practitioners who were laypeople, the original Buddhist tradition was maintained in secret.

4. Langdarma was eventually assassinated and slowly Buddhism began to come back into the center of the country. By that time the royal dynasty had collapsed and Tibet had dissolved into a series of petty monarchies, resulting in general chaos.

The second diffusion

5. Gradually the monastic order revived and came back to the center of Tibet, and the work of translation started again in what is called the second diffusion. The second diffusion was entirely different than the first because it was not subsidized by royalty. The second diffusion was

actually a very heroic undertaking because individual Tibetans made the difficult journey crossing the Himalayas into India, staying there for long periods at the risk of their lives, often dying from disease, meeting with Indian masters, and then coming back to Tibet with texts that they translated.

6. As the monastic order began to reshape, the centers of Dharma activity in Tibet were no longer supported by royalty, but by the monasteries. The monasteries then became the centers of culture and learning and spiritual practice.

Atisha and the Kadampa tradition

7. One of the key figures in this process was Atisha, who was the renowned abbot of Vikramashila in northeast India, and was invited to the southeastern Tibetan Plateau in 1037 by Yeshe-Ö, the extraordinary king of one of the dynastic regions there. Yeshe-Ö had been captured by his enemies, and his enemies required his own weight in gold as his ransom. This amount of gold was collected by his people. However, Yeshe-Ö told his people not to use it for ransom, but instead take it to India and invite Atisha. So it's thanks to Yeshe-Ö's sacrifice that Atisha came to the southeastern Tibetan Plateau, and gradually made his way to the center of the country.

8. Atisha started the process of the second diffusion on a big scale, reviving the monastic order, making several translations of his own, and inspiring many others. Atisha's text *A Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment* became the foundation for the *Lamrim*, or stages of the path tradition. He also founded what was known as the Kadam or Kadampa school, and the six basic texts of the Kadampa included *The Way of the Bodhisattva* of Shantideva.

9. The founding of the Kadampas went hand in hand with the founding of various monasteries, in particular the monastery of Sangpu, which became the center of Tibetan Buddhist scholasticism. The whole system of debate, the logic tradition, and the studies of Madhymaka, were all elaborated at Sangpu. One of the tools that was invented at Sangpu for scholastic study was what was known as the *sapchey*, which is the breaking up of a text into different headings and subheadings—what we would call a textual outline.

10. The textual outline is a commentarial tool. Starting with a root text, the commentator will divide the text into its various subsections according to the way the commentator understands it. It's possible that different commentators will produce different textual outlines of the same text. So a *sapchey* can be understood as the most basic level of a text's interpretive commentary. *Sapchey*s can be very elaborate. They can also be very helpful, especially when they're memorized.

11. Atisha's Kadampa tradition became extremely influential throughout the 11th and 12th centuries. They put great emphasis on the purity of monastic discipline. They laid great emphasis on bodhicitta and the practice of compassion. They were largely vegetarian, which was quite a challenge in Tibet due to its climate and altitude. The Kadampa school was so influential that it, in fact, eventually became absorbed into all four schools of Tibetan Buddhism—Nyingma, Kagyu, Sakya, and Gelug—to such an extent that the Kadampa school disappeared, as such, but the Kadampa spirit informed all four schools.

Tsongkhapa and the Gelugpa tradition

12. When Tsongkhapa founded the Gelugpas in the early 15th century he consciously modeled his monastery on the Kadampa teaching. The Gelugpa school became the dominant school of Tibet. Tsongkhapa was a brilliant teacher and he *re-presented* the teachings of Shantideva, absorbing them completely into his own texts of the *Lamrim Chenmo*, the different stages of the path. It was so good, and so successful, that the actual text of Shantideva ceased to be studied for a time as a separate entity.

Patrul Rinpoche and the *Bodhicharyavatara*

13. By the 19th century, the *Bodhicharyavatara* could only be found mentioned on the lists of rare books. Although the spirit of Shantideva's teachings were still alive, *The Way of the Bodhisattva* wasn't studied particularly as a separate entity, until the arrival of an extraordinary master called Patrul Rinpoche (1808–1887), who had enormous devotion to the text of Shantideva and taught it constantly wherever he went. He taught it not only to the monks in the monasteries but he taught it also to large groups of laypeople, to the extent that the laypeople received an education from him. They say there are whole areas of Tibet where the practice of hunting ceased because of the influence of Patrul Rinpoche.

14. Patrul Rinpoche had many disciples. One of his closest disciples was Khenpo Kunzang Pelden (1862–1943), or “Khenpo Kunkel” for short. Khenpo Kunkel wrote a very good, very clear, very full and influential commentary called *The Nectar of Manjushri's Speech*. Patrul Rinpoche himself never wrote a commentary on the *Bodhicharyavatara*, but he taught it constantly, so his way of interpretation became very familiar to many people. Although he didn't write a commentary, he wrote a *sapchey*—a textual outline. Patrul Rinpoche's *sapchey* is what Khenpo Kunkel used for his commentary, plus extensive notes he himself took during a six-month course on the *Bodhicharyavatara* given by Patrul Rinpoche at Dzogchen Monastery.

Chapter 1: “The Excellence of Bodhicitta”

The division of the text into three sections

1. Last time we talked about the text being divided into three sections, according to the verse of Nagarjuna: “*May precious bodhicitta arise where it has not yet come to be, and where it has arisen may it never decline, but grow forever more and more.*” So the first three chapters have to do with precious bodhicitta arising where it has not yet come to be. What Shantideva is doing is stimulating an interest in bodhicitta.

2. Remember, this text is something Shantideva wrote for himself. It wasn't intended for publication. He says at the beginning that he only wrote it to deepen his own understanding. Nobody had ever heard it except himself until the monks at Nalanda were trying to humiliate him, thinking he didn't know anything, and asked him to teach something new.

3. Bear in mind also, that throughout all the arguments he puts in this text, Shantideva is primarily talking to himself. But he says if someone equal to himself in good fortune may glance at this text maybe it will be helpful to them, so he's willing to share it.

4. In chapter 1, Shantideva begins with a salutation to the Buddhas and says in the second stanza: [2] *“Here I shall say nothing that has not been said before, and in the art of prosody I have no skill. I therefore have no thought that this might be of benefit to others; I wrote it only to habituate my mind.”*

5. [3] *“My faith will thus be strengthened for a little while, that I might grow accustomed to this virtuous way. But others who now chance upon my words may profit also, equal to myself in fortune.”*

6. It’s interesting how he oscillates between an expression of humility and the awareness that what he has to say is important. The commentator says this is an interesting way to go when you’re studying the Dharma. He says that when you are generating excellent qualities, the generation of excellent qualities is impeded in the mind by two extremes. Either an arrogant overconfidence on the one hand, or a feeling of incompetence and self-denigration on the other. The important thing is to have a middle way, where you focus not upon what you’re going to say, not upon yourself, but what is being said, and what is being studied.

Making the best use of a good human life

7. Shantideva then goes on to talk about the difficulty of attaining a precious human life, which is the basis of all spiritual endeavor. It’s important for us to reflect upon the difficulty of gaining a human life and on its fragility. It’s auspicious that one arises in a human form where spiritual progress is possible, and also at a time when the teaching still exists and is available. We can think about ourselves being in that position—our position is extremely fortunate.

8. Just to think about the world in general, which is so full of chaos, and violence, and exploitation, and deception, and poverty, and sickness, here we are—almost miraculously—sitting here, and we’ve come together to think about the Dharma, to think about Buddhism and bodhicitta. That is a very precious thing to have happened to us. It is itself an indication that we have a great deal of merit, of *sonam* positive energy accumulated in our mindstreams. So it stands to reason that we should try to make use of it, because it’s so easy to lose.

9. Shantideva’s general technique is to present us with a wonderful idea, a glorious objective which he explains in very poetic terms, and then very often he’ll switch to the opposite extreme and try to scare us by saying the stakes are extremely high. This precious situation we have right now will pass and we may lose it. We may fall into great suffering where we won’t be able to do anything about it. It’s very important to not only understand the teachings but to actually continue in them.

10. This is an intensely personal approach of Shantideva. He’s reciting something he has composed for himself. He’s not trying to impose it on anybody else. He’s talking about what has happened in his own mind. When it comes to spiritual life and the practice of the path, everything depends on what is happening in one’s own heart. Very often we live our lives in a very externalized way. We worry what people think about us, worry about our place in society, our success, the kind of influence people may have on us, our family and friends.

11. But when it comes to taking refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, or when it comes to generating the thought of bodhicitta, it can only happen in the secret of our own hearts. Even if we're living in a family, they don't know what's going on inside us. Everything depends on what we do. Khenpo Kunpel, in his commentary says once you have attained this opportunity, once you've come across the Dharma, once you've met a competent teacher, your first resolve should be never to lose this situation—never to let it go. Do whatever you can to prevent it from fading away. It's certain that if you do nothing, it will fade, even if at the moment you're filled with inspiration.

12. He says you should resolve never to lose it, but develop it more and more. Khenpo Kunpel says, "Don't ask your father. Don't discuss it with your mother. Don't let others decide for you. Just make your own way, make up your own mind, and be independent. Be like a yak, with its nose rope tied around its own head." With a yak, if you put a rope through its nose, people can lead it everywhere, but if it has the rope wrapped around its own head it's free, it can go where it wants.

13. And then he says leave your enemies. If you've got enemies, just forget about them, leave them. Leave them to their own devices, don't try to fight back. Leave it all. Don't bother about revenge, don't bother about your reputation, just go. He says, let your fields dry up. He's talking about the kind of practitioner that one could find in Tibet, like Patrul Rinpoche himself.

14. Patrul Rinpoche had been recognized as a *tulku*, the reincarnation of the high lama at the Palg  monastery in eastern Tibet, so he was put in a particular position there as a child and as a young man. Specifically, he was in the power of the administrator of the monastery, in what is called the *labrang*, the lama's house of his previous incarnation in the monastery. Eventually the administrator died and Patrul Rinpoche took his chance. He closed the *labrang* and left, just walked out. He left them to their own devices and he became a wandering hermit, living in caves and under trees. He wandered all over the place. If he had to travel somewhere, all he had to do was stand up. The only things he had were the clothes he was wearing. He didn't have to worry about packing anything, he just got up and went.

15. Of course, we don't live like this. We live in a very different society. So that requires a certain amount of skill on our part to create a kind of mental freedom, a kind of mental solitude, our own secret place where renunciation can happen, where bodhicitta can be born.

Mind training reflection: The prison of samsara

16. In the mind training teachings we're presented with all sorts of thought experiments to do while we're reflecting in meditation, or when we're driving to work, or standing in line at the grocery store. Things that help us appreciate the present precious moment. One of these mind training teachings presents us with an image of a prison on an island. This prison is vast and it's full of wretched inmates who are constantly being tortured by sadistic guards. One aspect of the sadism of these guards is that they'll randomly pick a few people and they'll take them outside the prison and leave them for the whole day on the beach. They tell the prisoners they can do whatever they like. The guards know eventually when the night comes they'll take the prisoners back into the hell realm, the prison. And it's a great delight for them to see the suffering of these prisoners when they have lost their brief time of pleasure and freedom and they go back.

17. On this beach there are a number of boats, and on the horizon they can see the distant shore of freedom. The prisoners can leave if they want to, the guards aren't there to stop them. But what everyone does is wander around the island admiring the prison from the outside, and they don't realize that they can leave. They can get out, but they don't do it. And this is the position of so many us human beings. To have a precious human birth is to be in that moment of opportunity. We meet the Dharma—the boats are there. Freedom is in sight. But we don't take the opportunity. That mind training is quite useful when we're feeling depressed, or lazy, or have a loss of interest, and we find the Dharma is either boring or too difficult.

A rare and precious opportunity

18. If we look at chapter one, it divides into two main sections. The first section consists of stanzas 1 to 5, and the second part is stanza 6 to the end of the chapter. Chapter one has a simple format. Here are stanzas 1 to 5:

19. [1] *“To those who go in bliss, the dharmakaya they possess, and all their heirs, To all those worthy of respect, I reverently bow. According to the scriptures, I shall now in brief describe the practice of the Bodhisattva discipline. [2] Here I shall say nothing that has not been said before, and in the art of prosody I have no skill. I therefore have no thought that this might be of benefit to others; I wrote it only to habituate my mind. [3] My faith will thus be strengthened for a little while, that I might grow accustomed to this virtuous way. But others who now chance upon my words may profit also, equal to myself in fortune.”*

20. [4] *“So hard to find the ease and wealth whereby the aims of beings may be gained. If now I fail to turn it to my profit, how could such a chance be mine again? [5] Just as on a dark night black with clouds, the sudden lightning glares and all is clearly shown, likewise rarely, through the Buddhas' power, virtuous thoughts rise, brief and transient, in the world.”*

21. The virtuous thoughts in this case are the thoughts of bodhicitta. It's there in the mind, it won't be there for very long. While it's there, let's try to understand it, let's try to prolong it, let's try to deepen our understanding of it. Notice that Shantideva is talking about himself, he's talking about his own advantage. This is an important part of the path. We often hear Buddhism is the path of no self. But in fact, ego is a very important component. Why? Because it's the whole nexus of self-interest which will act as a kind of catalyst to the path. Shantideva goes on and on about not falling into the lower realms, trying to protect yourself, trying to aim for higher things, trying to aim for happiness, aiming for the glorious result.

22. In other words, you're doing something for *you*. If you look at the teaching of the Four Noble Truths, which is the first and most basic teaching that the Buddha gave, it's based on self-interest—*The problem with you is not that you're bad, the problem is that you suffer. So if you don't want to suffer, I'll show you a way.* The wish not to suffer is a deeply ingrained attitude of all sentient beings. Every being that has a sense of self will protect itself. You can go in the garden and you can see a slug—it's just a piece of muscle, it hasn't got a bone in its body. But it has a mind, a consciousness. If you poke it, it will recoil and try to protect itself. If you put a leaf of lettuce in front of it, it will come towards it. It has a feeling of wanting something, and it has a feeling of wanting to avoid something. It has a sense of self. This is a fundamental feature of our

existence, so the Buddha, the teacher who is skilled in means, makes use of it, and Shantideva does also.

The benefits of bodhicitta

23. Once he's got this idea that he's found this precious opportunity, and this precious opportunity is very rare and very fragile, Shantideva then goes on to talk about this idea of bodhicitta and present it in wonderful terms—that it's something everyone would want to have. He talks about the superiority of bodhicitta as a virtue. When it happens to somebody, it completely transforms their mind, they are enabled by it, they become children of the Buddha, children of the conqueror.

24. And then he shows different benefits of bodhicitta through various examples. He talks about how bodhicitta transforms the mind, as in alchemy. Alchemy was practiced in India, and various masters of the Dharma were considered to be alchemists, like Nagarjuna. It is said he knew how to transform base metals into gold. Using this idea, Shantideva says bodhicitta is like that. It takes the base metal of the ordinary mind, of the ordinary human body and transforms it into the mind and body of a Buddha.

25. He talks about bodhicitta as a precious jewel which transforms a poor person into a rich person. If somebody possesses a diamond, they are a rich person. They may find it in the dust, but they become rich. He says it's a goal of endless benefit. He talks about how bodhicitta is constantly renewing itself as a source of merit, or *sonam*, in the mind. We talked about the importance of *sonam* last time. He talks about bodhicitta as a protection for the mind, that even a mind that is weighed down by negativity—as our minds are, looking back over the endless series of lives we've lived through—it acts as the supreme protection that keeps us from falling. It's like the apocalyptic fire, the fire that will consume the universe at the end of its time, and it will consume our negative actions and reduce them to dust.

The difference between worldly compassion and Bodhicitta

26. In the midst of this praise of bodhicitta, he gives a slight analysis of what bodhicitta is—he gives us an identification of it. If you look at the commentaries, bodhicitta can be understood as the desire to attain enlightenment for the sake of others. At the moment, we might have a feeling of compassion, of sorrow when we see the suffering of others, but one of the worst things about that is realizing we can't do anything to help them. If you've ever seen somebody completely wasted away by cancer, or you see a mother who has lost her baby, or you see groups of people reduced to great poverty, homelessness and suffering, you feel compassion, but you can't effectively do anything.

27. The image that is given in the teachings is of a woman who has no arms and sees her child being carried away by a river. She can't do anything to save the child. All she can do is scream and weep, and run up and down the riverbank. When we listen to Buddhist teachings, we realize the importance of compassion, but that's not enough. We have to have the ability to save others. The only way we can do that in the long run—within the perspective of the Buddhist teachings lasting over many, many lifetimes—is to teach them.

What an enlightened being can and can't do for others

28. If somebody is falling into a hellish existence, because of their negative karma, there's very little that even the Buddha can do. The Buddha can't pick someone up and put them in a state of bliss. The Buddha says in the sutras, "I cannot wash sins away with water. I cannot transfer my realization into the minds of others by magic. What I can do is to show you the way." His dying words were, "Work out your own salvation with diligence." The only thing that can save the mind is the mind itself. It's the mind itself that is transformed by implementing the teachings. This is how the Buddha is able to save. This is why the Buddha is an object of refuge.

29. Of course, an enlightened being, a being who has great spiritual power and insight, also has access to a great range of skillful means, because that being can actually perceive the needs of the individual and give them the necessary teaching that they need. That is the mark of an authentic teacher. So bodhicitta is the desire to attain that state for the sake of others, not to attain Buddhahood because we want to have the comfort of being a Buddha. It's not like wanting to go to heaven in order to put an end to one's own particular sorrows. It is this desire which is based on compassion but goes beyond compassion, and is actually the great decision to do something about it.

Aspirational bodhicitta and engaged bodhicitta

30. Shantideva divides bodhicitta into two halves or aspects: bodhicitta in aspiration and bodhicitta in engagement. Bodhicitta in aspiration is the first step: it's wanting to attain enlightenment for the sake of others. Bodhicitta in engagement are the actual practices we do in order to transform ourselves for the sake of others. Shantideva says, [15] "*Bodhicitta, the awakened mind, is known in brief to have two aspects: first, aspiring, bodhicitta in intention; then active bodhicitta, practical engagement.* [16] *As corresponding to the wish to go and then setting out, the wise should understand respectively the difference that divides these two.*"

31. [17] "*From bodhicitta in intention great results arise for those still turning in the wheel of life; yet merit does not rise from it in ceaseless streams as is the case with active bodhicitta.* [18] *For when, with irreversible intent, the mind embraces bodhicitta, willing to set free the endless multitudes of beings, in that instant, from that moment on, a great and unremitting stream, a strength of wholesome merit, even during sleep and inattention, rises equal to the vastness of the sky.*"

Meditation on the one who is most dear to you

32. There are various teachings set forth in the mind training tradition that generate this aspirational bodhicitta, this desire. One of them, which is called the meditation on one's mother, is a way to do this. The idea is you reflect about whoever is most dear to you in your own individual experience. It might well be your mother, it might be somebody else. And you think that the way you feel about that person and the way you are thought of by that person has at some stage been the case between you and every other being at some point in the space of your past lives, which extend back to infinity. You have an appreciation for the good those beings have done to you and you have the feeling you want to repay it.

33. If you think of your old mother, for instance—not everybody has had a good mother, but many people do—this person who has looked after you, who has done things for you that nobody

else would have—accepted you in her body, brought you to birth, looked after you and protected you, it would be a terrible thing to abandon such a person in their old age when they have no health or protection. Therefore you feel *I can't leave them, I can't leave this person, I must do something*. People feel that even when they haven't had a good relationship with their mother. They often feel a sense of responsibility.

34. At this point in the meditation one generates love, the desire that they should be happy; one generates compassion, the wish that they don't suffer. And when you can bring these feelings for this person to an emotional pitch within yourself, you spread it out to include all beings, thinking, *Once upon a time, I was the center of every sentient being's love, every sentient being has looked after me with the greatest tenderness*. Even an animal, even somebody you don't like—your sworn enemy or your least favorite politician—was at some point someone for whom you were their greatest treasure and who also was for you, your greatest treasure. That's the terrible tragedy of being in samsara, because we are surrounded by our mothers and don't recognize it. The animals that we eat, the people we don't like, the soldiers who kill and the people *who* they kill, sleazy politicians, and so on. The tragedy is that we don't recognize each other anymore. We've forgotten. All the people that we meet—we've forgotten them and they've forgotten us. And that is the nature of samsara.

35. It's useful to let these kinds of thoughts turn in one's mind so that one gradually begins to acquire a tenderness towards others. You see the cashier in the supermarket and instead of wanting to get through as quickly as possible you notice that it's the end of the day, and she or he is tired, they're probably going to make mistakes, and they really need their job. Gradually you become a little more sensitive to others, and that's very precious. These are all the sorts of things that add up to bodhicitta in intention or aspiration.

36. Because as we will see, the actual task ahead is enormous. Just on the level of the sutra teachings it is said that once you have engaged in the bodhisattva way of life, in the best of cases you can expect Buddhahood after three countless eons. That's a very long time. That's in the best of cases; it can be a lot longer than that. In a sense, when you get that idea, you realize that the goal will always remain far ahead and actually the reality is the path—the different skills you acquire and the way in which you relate to others.

Wanting bodhicitta

37. The way Shantideva describes the path, it seems very difficult. You might think, *I'm never going to do it. I can't even sit for five minutes. My mind is constantly invaded by negativity, I feel bad about myself, I'm surrounded by people I don't like...* If we're honest, that occupies quite a lot of our experience. But the important question is, do you want it or don't you? And if you say *yes, I want it*, you're already on the path, you've started. That's bodhicitta in aspiration.

38. In this first chapter Shantideva reflects on the nature of bodhicitta and he does it in such a way that he ends up wanting to have bodhicitta. That's the purpose of this first chapter, talking about the excellence of bodhicitta. And what it's meant to do for us who read it, is to instill a longing for it. We may feel just to have bodhicitta is an ideal that's very difficult to attain, but simply to want it, to long for it, to yearn for it, is the very important first step. Khenpo Kunkel says that, "we must give rise to bodhicitta in ourselves and when we do we will yearn for

whatever will engender it wherever it has previously been absent. And we will intensify it where it has arisen without ever letting it decline. When we have such an interest and longing, so great that none can prevent it, like a hungry and thirsty person craving for food and water, this is truly the result of understanding the benefits of bodhicitta.”

39. If somebody’s really thirsty, you can never say to them, “Stop wanting to drink,” because they can’t. When aspirational bodhicitta really takes birth, you can’t stop people from wanting to gain enlightenment. And to that end he says we should train ourselves over and over again. So to go back to the original point about the privacy of this wish, deep in the secret place of one’s own heart, it’s very important in all Buddhist teachings to bring everything into our experience as much as we can, and not to leave it simply on the level of intellectual understanding. In a sense, that’s what we’re doing now—having an intellectual understanding through talking and listening and reading. But the real work is what’s happening inside each of our hearts and minds.

The wisdom of meditation

40. It’s great to study the Dharma. The Dharma is a huge subject, and very interesting. It has its whole cultural dimension, philosophical dimension, ethical dimension, it can be very interesting. One can take all manner of courses in the university and get degrees and write one’s thesis and get a doctorate. But when you think about the preciousness of this opportunity, to leave this life with nothing but a PhD in Buddhism is not a great thing. If you use the analogy of a computer, everything that you learn intellectually is like what’s in the RAM of the computer. It’ll stay there as long as the computer’s on. As soon as the computer is shut down, everything in the RAM is wiped out. As soon as we die, within minutes all the learning of a career is wiped out. It falls into complete oblivion. We forget everything (if we haven’t already forgotten it by the time we die). All that remains is what’s in the hard drive. The only way to transfer content from the ‘RAM’ into the ‘hard drive’ is by constant repetition, acquiring the habit. It’s the habits that remain. What we bring with us into this life when we’re born isn’t anything we’ve learned in our previous life intellectually. What we bring are the habitual tendencies that have gradually been set up in the process of our previous existences.

41. That’s what the wisdom of meditation is. We obviously have to have things in the RAM to begin with—we have to have intellectual understanding. But then we reflect on that intellectual understanding and it gets deeper and deeper. Then through meditation—and remember the Tibetan word for meditation—*gom*—means *habituation*—the mind gradually becomes more and more imbued with these habitual ways of thinking. And that’s what we take with us when we die, and that’s what we bring with us into the next life when we’re born.

The greatness of being a bodhisattva

42. Then Shantideva goes on to extol the merits of bodhicitta by reflecting on how great bodhisattvas are. If you ever meet a bodhisattva, they say you will know that they are extraordinary beings. Somebody like His Holiness the Dalai Lama has a kind of power that you immediately recognize. And it’s a power that comes from complete fearlessness, because a bodhisattva has absorbed the teachings to such an extent that it’s their ground base. They have absolutely no doubt. They are a source of peace and confidence and an object of refuge.

43. When we talk about taking refuge, we take refuge in an *object* of refuge. But when we take the vow of bodhicitta, when we try to become a bodhisattva, we are actually committing to *becoming* an object of refuge ourselves. A being that will be able to guide and save people from the useless sufferings of samsara—like a mother who grows arms, rather than being armless.

44. The question can be raised, “How do we know when we’ve got real bodhicitta?” That’s hard to say at the stage we’re at right now. But what we can know is if we want it—we can know that. There are different ways of classifying bodhicitta. There’s the bodhicitta of the real beginner. There’s the bodhicitta of those who are on the paths of accumulation and preparation. There’s the bodhicitta that is present in the minds of people who attain the path of seeing, and then all through the ten *bhumis*, bodhicitta is present. And this kind of bodhicitta becomes more and more refined and powerful, but then how can we quantify it? It’s a personal experience.

Relative bodhicitta and ultimate bodhicitta

45. Shantideva says there’s such a thing as aspirational bodhicitta and there’s such a thing as bodhicitta of engagement. Then he also makes another distinction, which is relative bodhicitta and ultimate bodhicitta, which is something that is very important to understand. Relative bodhicitta is all the practices of the path that lead to enlightenment for the sake of others. The practices of compassion, loving kindness, patience, and so on. All the studies and realizations that come on the different levels. That’s all relative bodhicitta. Whereas ultimate bodhicitta is emptiness. The ultimate nature of phenomena. Ultimate bodhicitta can be understood actually as our buddha nature, which remains completely and always and forever perfect.

46. When we talk about the realization of enlightenment, it’s not something that comes in to us from outside, it is something that flowers from within us. Every mindstream has this nature, this ultimate nature which is the Buddha nature, which is concealed by the veils of the obscurations which have been built up over beginningless lifetimes through negativities, through ignorance, through the three poisons. Ultimate bodhicitta is actually the disclosure of our Buddha nature. We can look at ultimate bodhicitta in that way or we can look at it as the realization of the emptiness of all phenomena. The teachings of emptiness are the teachings about ultimate bodhicitta. The bodhisattva path is the progress toward ultimate bodhicitta.

—Transcribed and Edited by Tenzin Sherab/Christopher Moroney