

TIBETAN BUDDHISM CENTER FOR WORLD PEACE
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Shantideva's *Bodhicharyavatara*, The Way of the Bodhisattva
Chapter 8: "Meditative Concentration" Part 1

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, and commentary by His Holiness the Dalai Lama from A Flash of Lightning in the Dark of Night, A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life.

TBCWP Session 7: Sunday, April 16, 2023

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

An overview of Chapter 8

1. Shantideva now moves on to the eighth chapter, "Meditative Concentration", where he talks about the actual practice of meditation. Remember when we were talking about bodhicitta we said that it can be classified in various ways—we can talk about aspiring bodhicitta and engaged bodhicitta. In the case of engaged bodhicitta, it can be divided into relative bodhicitta and ultimate bodhicitta—ultimate bodhicitta being wisdom, the wisdom of emptiness, the realization of the nature of the mind, and relative bodhicitta being everything on the path that brings one to that state. So all of the mind training teachings, all the teachings on compassion and love, discipline, the vows—all that is part of relative bodhicitta.

2. In this chapter, Shantideva takes up the two practices of *the equalization of self and other* and *the exchange of self and other* that he briefly mentions in chapter seven. These are actually the quintessential practices of relative bodhicitta. The chapter is divided into two main sections. The first section has to do with creating the conducive conditions for meditative concentration, and then the second section is a description of the meditation itself. In the first section Shantideva talks about the importance of solitude, the importance of practice, and he talks about the obstacles to this which we have to deal with.

The importance of meditative concentration

3. Bear in mind, Shantideva was a monk at Nalanda, a huge monastery in India. Monasteries in India (and Tibet as well) were extremely busy places and extremely noisy. They were, and are, very different from the kinds of monasteries we tend to think of in the Christian contemplative tradition, where for long periods of the day monastics are not allowed to speak at all and the whole place is cloaked in contemplative silence. Tibetan monasteries are hives of activity, thousands of people—from seven year old boys to men in their nineties—doing all sorts of jobs and daily tasks inside and outside, attending classes, and clapping their hands and shouting at each other on the debate ground. Shantideva says it's important to withdraw from all of that kind of activity and to quiet down. Actually he was probably doing that all of his life, which is why the monks at Nalanda didn't like him—he didn't get involved in those kinds of activities.

4. Shantideva says, [1] “*Cultivating heroic perseverance as just described [in the previous chapter], In concentration I will place my mind. For those whose minds are slack and wandering Are caught between the fangs of the afflictions.*” Wulstan Fletcher says it’s quite easy to be a very busy person, and even a very learned and studious one, but at the same time to have a lazy mind—a mind that is not being constantly observed and kept under control by the forces of mindfulness. If our minds are slack and wandering it’s certain that we’ll be caught in the fangs of the afflictions. The afflictions will certainly arise in an undisciplined mind. We will cause misery for ourselves and unhappiness for everyone around us.

Transforming the mind through meditation

5. To strengthen our practice, it’s necessary to develop single-pointed concentration, or *samadhi* in Sanskrit. To do this, we first need to understand the disadvantages of being distracted, or *dunzi* in Tibetan, as we discussed in the last chapter. Lack of concentration prevents us from keeping our mind focused on the object of meditation. Our minds follow any thoughts that arise, and then it becomes all too easy for negative emotions to develop. Any positive actions we do will not reach their full potential. Distraction is therefore a big problem, and it’s very important to counteract it by developing mental calm abiding (skt *shamatha*) through the process of single-pointed concentration (skt *samadhi*).

6. His Holiness the Dalai Lama says the practice of calm abiding is not unique to Buddhism, and is not uniquely special, since *shamatha*, or mental calm abiding alone does not result in enlightenment. But achieving mental calm abiding through single-pointed concentration is very important in fully developing the power of our positive actions, and it is crucial for our practice of clear insight (*vipashyana*). The Madhyamika view, which is the view of the Middle Way introduced by Nagarjuna, is first established through our analytical reasoning until we eventually attain certainty in it. It is discussed more fully in chapter 9 of Shantideva’s text. This view of emptiness is very subtle, and unless our power of concentration is stable, there is a danger of losing it. The more stable our concentration is, the clearer our understanding of emptiness will be.

7. In his commentary to this text, His Holiness describes two types of meditation. First, there is analytical meditation, where we repeatedly examine an object until we gain a degree of certainty concerning its nature. When we’ve gone as far as we can with our analysis, we let ourselves rest in the state of clarity and certainty we have achieved. This is called placement meditation. This is the type of meditation that we use in practices such as visualizing the Buddha or tantric deities and training in mental calm abiding, where we develop our power of concentration.

8. We can also meditate on devotion, such as devotion to one’s teacher or guru, in order to understand and increase it; or on impermanence, where we contemplate an object and the way in which it is constantly changing; or on emptiness, realizing that the object of meditation—whatever it is—has no truly independent self-existing nature. There are also many ways of meditating on how we perceive things. In meditation it is important to learn how to distinguish between the object as it appears to our sense consciousnesses, the object in itself, the object as it is conventionally considered to be, and the object’s purpose or intention.

9. In short, meditation is a way of training and transforming the mind. His Holiness says for our purposes, the main thing is to develop mental calm abiding through single-pointed concentration and to meditate on bodhicitta. For our concentration to become clear, we need the right conditions, and those are freedom from outer distractions. The ideal would be to meditate in a secluded place that is conducive to physical and mental serenity.

The need to be free from distractions

10. Shantideva says, [2] *“In solitude, the mind and body Are not troubled by distraction. Therefore leave this worldly life And totally abandon mental wandering.* [3] *Because of loved ones and desire for gain We fail to turn away from worldly things. These, then, are the first things to renounce. The prudent should conduct themselves like this.* [4] *Penetrative insight Utterly eradicates afflicted states. Knowing this, first search for calm abiding, Found by people who are happy to be free from worldly ties.”* This is quite a challenge for us. In the case of Shantideva’s monastic community, they had—at least in theory—already renounced family life and loved ones. And in theory they had renounced desire for gain. It didn’t always work out very well in practice, but that was the idea. So Shantideva talks about this and he says if we fail to turn away from worldly things we won’t get anywhere. This is actually quite an important thing for us to think about. We’re not monks or nuns. We’re not living in a monastery. But as was said before, Tibetan monasteries are quite busy places. Monastic monks and nuns are not different from us in the sense that they’re idle or just sitting and meditating all day.

11. On the other hand, we live in families—we have wives and husbands and children. We have responsibilities. We are emotionally caught up in those relationships and responsibilities, which is completely natural and unavoidable. So the question is, what do we do with that? How do we cultivate a sense of solitude? This is something for each one of us to find out for ourselves according to our own possibilities and inclinations—how to take time off during the day, how to take a few minutes here and there to reflect quietly on the teachings. It’s an important aspect of life and although it’s not easy to implement, we should definitely try.

The question of emotional attachment

12. There’s also the question of emotional attachment. We approached this question earlier when we talked about separating our relationships into three groups—friends, enemies, and strangers—according to our own egocentric attitude. When we reflect in this way, we can see that our child, our dear baby, our wife or husband or lover, are very important to us at the moment. At the same time, it’s also important to remember that this is a very, very transient situation. Those people have come from an incalculable series of lives in the past and so have we. We’ve met at this place and time, like travelers at a railway station or in a hotel, and eventually we will split, we will divide, and go our different ways. That’s actually a very useful idea because it puts into perspective the nature of the relationship. We’ve come together at this moment, so let’s be happy, let’s appreciate each other, let’s not spoil it by being selfish or angry with one another.

13. At the same time, the teachings are always calling us to step back a little and realize, for example, that although our children are very special to us, they’re actually not that different from other children. If we look at the situation from the children’s point of view, they are completely the same. Of course, from our egocentric point of view they look very different in

terms of their importance to us. So basically what Shantideva is saying is that we should withdraw somewhat. If one has the capacity to take monastic vows and cultivate genuine renunciation, that is a wonderful thing. But if we haven't got that interest or capacity or possibility, there are plenty of other ways to follow the path. A Bodhisattva is not automatically a monastic. In the Nyingma tradition, some of the greatest lamas have been married in our modern age. In the Sakya tradition, Sakya Trizin is a married man.

The need to stop our habits of clinging attachment and aversion

14. Shantideva continues, [7] *"If I crave for other beings A veil is cast upon the perfect truth. Wholesome disillusion [for samsara] melts away, And finally there comes the sting of pain. [8] My thoughts are all for them, And thus my life is frittered by. My family and friends all change and pass, for whom The changeless Dharma is cast out."* His Holiness the Dalai Lama points out that since we're impermanent, is it really worth being so attached to others who are also impermanent? Is it really worth getting angry with them? We should reflect on this, and try to stop our habitual patterns of clinging and aversion.

15. [9] *"For if I act like childish beings, Sure it is that I shall fall to evil destinies. So why do I keep company with infants, Who lead me to a state so far from virtue?"* His Holiness says ordinary sentient beings in samsara who are dominated by gross attachment and hatred are like children. If we behave like them, we won't achieve anything for ourselves, and it will be impossible for us to benefit them. One minute they're our friends and the next minute they turn on us. However hard we might try, it is difficult to please them. And if we don't listen to them, they get angry at us.

16. [13] *"Keep company with childish ones and what follows? Self-praise, putting others down, and Chattering about the pleasures of samsara. Every kind of vice is sure to come. [14] Only ruin can result From such a link between myself and others. For they will bring no benefit to me, And I in turn can do them nothing good. [15] Therefore flee the company of childish people. Greet them, when you meet, with smiles That keep on terms of common courtesy, Without inviting intimate relations."* So it's better to keep our distance from such people if we can. However, we should avoid offending them, and when we do meet them, we should be pleasant and considerate and do what we can to make them happy, without becoming too familiar. [16] *"Like bees that get their honey from the flowers, Take only what will serve the practice of the Dharma. Treat everyone like new acquaintances And keep yourself from close familiarity."*

The eight worldly concerns

17. Shantideva goes on to address our eight worldly concerns of having things or not having things, having pleasure or pain, having a good reputation or a bad reputation, and being praised or criticized. He says a wise person doesn't crave for things, because things like wealth and property, reputation and celebrity will naturally fade to nothing. Why be so attached to ephemeral pleasures that won't last past this lifetime? And who can say where history's wealthy and famous people have gone to now, with all the baggage of their riches and celebrity?

18. He continues on this theme of the eight worldly concerns: [21] *"Why should I be pleased when people praise me? Others there will be who scorn and criticize—And why be despondent*

when I'm blamed, Since there'll be others who think well of me? [22] So many are the leanings and wants of beings That even Buddha could not please them all—Of such a wretch as me no need to speak! I'll give up such concerns with worldly things. [23] People scorn the poor who have no wealth, They also criticize the rich who have it. What pleasure can derive from keeping company With people such as these, so difficult to please? [24] In kindness childish beings take no delight Unless their own desires are satisfied. A childish person, thus, is no true friend. This the Tahthagatas [Buddhas] have declared."

Creating the conducive conditions for meditation

19. In the next several stanzas, Shantideva talks about retreating to an environment such as a forest or cave that is conducive for a yogi to meditate with single-pointed concentration, free from personal concerns and attachment. Of course, we're not yogis, and it wouldn't be practical for us to go off by ourselves to live in a cave. We have families and relationships and jobs and responsibilities that are important for us to address. That doesn't mean we can't take Shantideva's advice to withdraw somewhat from those people and situations that would pull us away from our practice and study of the Dharma.

20. We need to decide what really matters to us in the long term. What patterns of thought and behavior do we want our mindstreams habituated to? If we think of ourselves as Bodhisattva spiritual warriors in training, huge progress can be made precisely *because* of the worldly situation we find ourselves in right now. We can truly make good use of our current life by consistently bringing our Dharma practice into everything we do. We can use our discernment to consciously let go of those things that don't support our practice and focus on those things we can use to increase our practice. Just like an Olympic athlete in training, we can welcome the rigors and challenges of our worldly Bodhisattva training, knowing that by firmly facing those challenges, we can actually use the resistance of them—just like an athlete would—to quickly make us stronger. We should never give up, because the progress we can make in this human life is so great.

Attachment to sensual pleasure

21. Shantideva then continues by pointing out the mistake of being attached to sensual pleasures. He talks about the problem of wanting to search for a partner and craving for a lover, which is felt as much by monks as any other men, and as much by nuns as any other women. Of course, in this context he's talking to a congregation of monks. This text is what Shantideva actually said to the monks in the courtyard at Nalanda monastic university. So he's talking about their challenges 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, it's a fairly simple thing to make adjustments according to our own sexual orientation.

22. He goes into a long description of how we can become completely infatuated with someone we're attracted to. His Holiness says, think about it: that person is only a mass of flesh and organs and rather unpleasant substances. What is it then we are attracted to—the person's body

or mind? If we think about it carefully we can't point to any real thing that is the source of our attachment other than a mere idea we project onto them. If we desire someone's body so much, then why don't we wish for flesh alone? As Shantideva says, [54] “*But it's the skin and flesh I love To touch and look upon.' Then why do you not wish for flesh alone, Inanimate and in its natural state?*” If it's the mind that we think we desire, Shantideva says, [55] “*The mind that you perhaps desire, You cannot hold or look upon. Whatever you can hold or see is not the mind—Why copulate with something it is not?*”

Examining the body

23. Let's examine the body. First of all, His Holiness says, the body originates from the procreative fluids of the parents. Once mature, it is made up of blood, flesh, organs, and bones. If we found any one of those things lying on the ground, we would be utterly revolted. Why then aren't we repelled by the body, which is made up of those elements? Shantideva says, [63] “*If still you doubt such filthiness, Though it is very plain for all to see, Go off into the charnel grounds; Observe the fetid bodies there abandoned.* [64] *When their skins are peeled away, You feel great horror and revulsion. Now that you have understood, How can you still take joy in such a thing?*”

24. A large part of what we eat and drink to sustain our bodies ends up as an unending stream of urine and excrement, filling the sewers we find so offensive. In fact, the very reason there are sewers is because our bodies are full of excrement. The body is no different from a sewer—Ven. Robina Courtin says we're all walking sewers! When we think about the body from this point of view, our attachment to it will begin to diminish, if not entirely disappear.

Projecting our desire onto another person

25. So what is it really that we're desiring in another person? It's actually an interesting reflection because what happens when we're in that kind of passionate relationship is that we're engaging with something that is a complete mirage. We are actually projecting onto them something that is coming from inside of us, and that's why that person appears to be 100 percent wonderful, 100 percent desirable, and 100 percent beautiful. Any of us who have been in that situation know that gradually we start to notice things in that person that don't quite fit our projections and we start to withdraw our projections and we see that person more accurately as they are. And then we realize that person is not as 100 percent desirable as we thought they were. That's quite an important point in any relationship because it's at the point when we see the person for who they are that we can decide to actually love them. Real love is not a matter of projection, it's a matter of decision. It's something we decide to do. It's at that point that either our relationship breaks up or we decide to carry on.

26. Shantideva goes into that idea, that when we're in love with somebody, when we desire somebody, we're desiring something that isn't actually there. And if we look more closely, we can dismantle our 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 in that context it's very important and something that Shantideva goes into in some detail.

Wealth and possessions

27. As far as wealth and possessions go, Shantideva says we go to great lengths to obtain them, and are even prepared to lose our lives for them. Once we have wealth, we're always afraid of losing it. Because of wealth, family members are set against each another, couples break up. When we don't have it we suffer, and when we do have it we also suffer! [79] *"The pain of gaining, keeping, and of losing all! See the endless hardships brought on us by property! For those distracted by their love of wealth There is no chance for freedom from the sorrows of existence. [80] They indeed, possessed of many wants, Will suffer many troubles, all for very little: They're like the ox that pulls the cart And catches bits of grass along the way."* For the smallest of pleasures, we can waste our human lives that are so hard to come by and provide us with such a precious opportunity for real spiritual growth.

28. [83] *"With but a millionth part of such vexation Enlightenment itself could be attained! Those who crave are plagued far more than those engaged upon the path, Yet Buddhahood is not what they attain!"* His Holiness says we should examine all the things that excite and distract our thoughts. Gradually these distractions will become less strong for us and our minds will become more calm. Then we will be able to meditate single-pointedly on bodhicitta. Shantideva says, [89] *"Pacify completely all discursiveness And cultivate the mind of bodhicitta. [90] Strive at first to meditate Upon the sameness of yourself and others. In joy and sorrow all are equal; Thus be guardian of all, as of yourself."*

The main bodhicitta meditation practice: equalizing and exchanging oneself with others

29. The main meditation on bodhicitta consists of considering others to be equal to oneself and then exchanging oneself with others. As Shantideva says in chapter 1, stanza 7, *"The mighty Buddhas, pondering for many eons, Have seen that this and only this will save The boundless multitudes of beings And bring them easily to supreme joy!"* This idea of exchanging oneself with others is a rather novel, strange idea for us, so it's worth thinking about it carefully and taking it seriously. In joy and sorrow we're all the same; everybody wants to be happy, nobody wants to suffer. There's a Tibetan saying: *beings have the same taste*. We're all the same.

30. Then he says, [91] *The hand and other limbs are many and distinct, But all are one—the body to be kept and guarded. Likewise, different beings, in their joys and sorrows, Are, like me, all one in wanting happiness.* It's because we're all the same, it's as if we're all members of a single body, just as our hands and feet are members of our physical body. He says, [92] *"This pain of mine does not afflict Or cause discomfort to another's body, And yet this pain is hard for me to bear Because I cling and take it for my own. [93] And other beings' pain I do not feel, and yet, Because I take them for myself, Their suffering is mine and therefore hard to bear."* In our case, when we get sick, when we get a headache, we become miserable, our minds become miserable because we're completely overwhelmed by the pain of our body. And we're overwhelmed because we've identified this pain in our body with ourselves. The reason why we're not sensitive to the pain of others is because we don't cling to it in the same way we cling to our own pain. On the other hand, Shantideva says if *I were able to do so, because I take them for myself, their suffering is mine and therefore hard to bear*.

Identifying with other beings

31. Following this argument one can say, insofar as beings become important to me through the practice of Shantideva's teaching, to the extent they become important to me, I become concerned with their pain. To the extent that I can welcome them in to my own feeling of self, to that extent I will feel their pain. Khenpo Kunpel's commentary says that a mother who has a baby who is in great distress, will suffer because she identifies so closely with the baby. It's almost as if she's feeling the pain of the child. The child's suffering is her suffering and she will do anything to remove it. So to the extent that we can identify with other beings, to that extent we will be eager to do something to remove their pain.

32. Wulstan Fletcher says that on a very mundane level, if you buy a new car and somebody comes and scratches its beautiful newly painted finish, it's almost as if they scratched you! Because the car is actually part of your ego identification, it's very precious to you. Khenpo Kunpel says the same thing, but in terms of a horse. When you're horse-dealing and you're selling your horse, up until the time you actually sell it you're concerned about whether it's hungry, or it's healthy, or whether it's tired. But as soon as the transaction takes place, all those concerns go from you to the buyer. From the point of view of the horse, there's no difference.

33. So he says, [94] *"And therefore I'll dispel the pain of others, For it is simply pain, just like my own. And others I will aid and benefit, For they are living beings, like my body. [95] Since I and other beings both, In wanting happiness, are equal and alike, What difference is there to distinguish us, That I should strive to have my bliss alone? [96] Since I and other beings both, In fleeing suffering, are equal and alike, What difference is there to distinguish us, That I should save myself and not the others?"*

The Buddhist understanding of impermanence and the continuum of the self

34. Then he goes on to say something quite interesting: [97] *Since the pain of others does no harm to me, I do not shield myself from it. So why to guard against 'my' future pain, Which does no harm to this, my present 'me'?"* This argument is based in the Buddhist understanding of what a person is, what a continuum is, and the correct understanding of impermanence. According to the teachings on impermanence, there is gross impermanence and subtle impermanence. Gross impermanence is what happens when you take a cup and smash it. The cup ceases to exist. The question is, how is it possible for a cup to move from existence into non-existence? According to the Buddhist way of looking at it, it's because the cup is not a stable, individual, unchanging entity. A cup can be divided into smaller and smaller particles, somewhat like atomic theory, and the life of a cup can be divided into smaller and smaller instants. Even the short moment of a finger snap can be divided into many parts. If you have a stacked pile of a hundred lotus leaves, and you hammer a nail through it, in a single moment it's done. But the fact that you've got a hundred lotus leaves that the nail has gone through shows that moment can be divided into a hundred parts. And so on, until you get down to what some Buddhist schools think of as an indivisible instant.

35. The specific Buddhist view here is that when you observe change in a thing, it's not that there is something that is actually getting older, but at each individual moment the thing is replaced, moment by moment, according to its subtle impermanence. The cup is there one moment and it's replaced by another cup in the next moment. We think of it as being a single

cup because it happens so quickly. For instance, when you see somebody whirling a firebrand around in the air it looks like a solid circle, but in fact it's just points of light going round, and we don't see the points of light because our senses are not that quick. We don't notice the change from point to point. This is similar to the way we don't notice each separate frame of film when we're watching a movie.

36. Nagarjuna says that to think something completely ceases to exist is the extreme view of nihilism. To think that something continues to exist from one moment to the next is the extreme view of permanence. So whereas we tend to think there is an individual self that passes through life from one moment to next, according to the Buddhist view there isn't an individual, unchanging substance that passes through time. Rather, there are individual instants that are constantly being replaced. You get the apparent continuity in a phenomenon without something actually passing from one moment to the next. The fact that we see it as a continuum is just because we're not quick enough to notice each moment.

37. When we talk about rebirth, or our self existing sometime in the future, according to this view, it's not that you yourself have passed from this moment into the next moment, or from this life to the next life, but rather there is a constant continuum which goes into the future. The future you is not the present you, although there is obviously a dependently arising connection. And Shantideva is saying that a future you is as alien from the present you as the person next to you in the present moment. So this is the answer to the objection, *why should I bother about the suffering of others when it's not my suffering, yet at the same time I'm bothered about my future suffering, which is also not my suffering?* It's an interesting idea that Shantideva puts forth. To say that you're not concerned about this other person's suffering, that you're only concerned about your future suffering is not an argument, because your future suffering is as alien to you now as the suffering of the person next to you. So Shantideva comes back to his main point that suffering has no possessor, and therefore no distinctions can be made. Pain is just pain. We all suffer it. Therefore to compartmentalize it into your suffering and my suffering is like taking space and trying to cut it with a pair of scissors. Of course, until we become enlightened we won't have the omniscient skill to help others completely remove their suffering, but as Bodhisattvas we don't wait until we're enlightened to start. We can start right now, and actually what we're doing now is contributing to the path.

38. Shantideva, again arguing with himself, says this practice, this compassion and feeling of concern for others is so disturbing, it causes me such pain, I'm actually increasing my pain by being compassionate. So then Shantideva says come off it, this is only a small thing compared with the suffering of all beings, and you can put up with this little discomfort of your compassion in order to remove the sufferings of everyone. He says, [108] *"The ocean-like immensity of joy Arising when all beings will be freed, Will this not be enough? Will this not satisfy? The wish for my own freedom, what is that to me?"*

Compiled and edited by Tenzin Sherab/Christopher Moroney