

TIBETAN BUDDHISM CENTER FOR WORLD PEACE
San Antonio, Texas

Shantideva's *Bodhicharyavatara*, The Way of the Bodhisattva
Chapter 8: "Meditative Concentration" Part 2

The following consists of edited and modified excerpts from 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* and *The Nectar of Manjushri's Speech: A Detailed Commentary on Shantideva's Way of the Bodhisattva*, by Khenpo Kunzang Pelden, as well as teachings on the paths and levels of the Bodhisattva by Ven. Thubten Chodron.

TBCWP Session 8: Sunday, April 23, 2023

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

A review of chapter 8, part 1

1. In the first part of chapter eight we talked about the distinction between ultimate bodhicitta—the wisdom that realizes emptiness with the intention of benefiting all beings, and relative bodhicitta—all the practices on the path that bring one to that state of realization. Relative bodhicitta is intensified through the practice of meditative concentration. Shantideva says if we fail to practice meditative concentration, if we just leave our minds to their own devices and we allow ourselves to become distracted and drift to the objects of our attachment and aversion, it is certain that we will lose whatever spiritual qualities we may have, and suffering will be the outcome.

2. To rid ourselves of distraction, we should keep a friendly distance between ourselves and the bustle of worldly affairs in the company of lots of people. If we actually want to be free of our habitual disturbing emotions and the suffering they cause, we must develop concentration and mental clarity. For our concentration to become clear, we need to be free from distractions, and in order to do that, it's necessary to find ways of creating some space and solitude in our lives. On the physical level, we need to let go of our clinging attachment to all the meaningless affairs and goings-on of the world, and on the mental level, we have to stop our minds from ceaselessly being drawn toward the objects of our senses.

3. To train ourselves in concentration, we should find ways to carve out some space and time our lives so we can be in solitude, alone, without our friends and family distracting us. This doesn't mean that we forsake them and turn our backs on them. But if we really want to produce meaningful spiritual progress on the path so that we can truly benefit our family, friends, and all other beings, we have to strike a working balance between our time with them and the time we regularly spend on our Dharma studies and meditative practices.

4. By using our times of solitude to train in *samadhi* (meditative concentration) and *shamatha* (mental calm abiding) our bodies and minds will become conditioned to wholesome, beneficial actions, and then whatever we meditate on, whether it's bodhicitta or something else, it will be well-realized, and we will be able to bring the benefits of our Dharma realizations into everything we engage in, including our relationships with others.

Developing the heart of bodhicitta

1. His Holiness the Dalai Lama says that a good heart imbued with wisdom is the source of all happiness and joy. This is the heart of bodhicitta—the strong desire to attain enlightenment in order to deliver all beings from suffering and bring them to Buddhahood. This desire to help others is rooted in compassion, which grows from a feeling of gratitude and love for beings, who are afflicted by suffering.

2. Traditionally there are two methods for developing this sort of care and gratitude. 1) One is to think about the fact that all beings have at some time in their countless succession of lifetimes been our parents or close friends, so that we naturally feel a close connection and gratitude toward them and wish to take on their suffering in exchange for our happiness. 2) The other method is to understand that other beings suffer in the same way we do, to see that we are all equal, and to reflect on the problem of our identifying with ego self-grasping and the advantages of altruism. We can use whichever of these two methods suits us best or practice them both together.

What suffering is according to Buddhism

1. With both of the methods for developing love and gratitude for beings, it's necessary for us to first understand what is meant by suffering according to Buddhism. It's not difficult for us to feel compassion for beings such as people and animals that are maltreated, starving, in pain or great distress. But when we think of beings who appear to be very happy, living in the lap of luxury without a care in the world while the rest of us struggle and suffer, we tend to feel jealousy and resentment rather than compassion. And even worse, when we think of those beings that harm us or others who we care about or who we feel are innocent victims, we tend to have anger or hatred for the perpetrators, and in extreme cases, we wish to see those perpetrators suffer for their actions and even be killed.

2. This is because we don't have a full understanding of what suffering is, and that all sentient beings suffer. According to Buddhism, suffering has its root in a sentient being's delusional idea of ego self-grasping which arises out of a primordial *ignorance* and misperception of reality. This primordial ego sees itself as being permanent and separate, with an independent singularity that it considers special in relation to everything else. Because of this mistaken view, a strong sense of neediness and desire arises in the ego, causing it to feel that it has to find beings, situations, and things outside its separate self to which it can become attached, and get from them what it thinks it needs and desires. When the ego gets what it wants from the things it's attached to, it's never enough because the satisfaction it gets from them doesn't last, and it craves for more. This sets up a habitual, addictive cycle of craving and grasping at what it desires, and manipulating to get more and more of it. When this delusional idea of ego self-grasping in any sentient being doesn't get what it wants—when *attachment* to the thing of its perceived need and desire is blocked in any way, *aversion* arises in a variety of forms: dissatisfaction and frustration, panic, anxiety, and fear, anger and malicious hatred, arrogance and jealousy, self-doubt and self-loathing, guilt and depression.

3. All of these disturbing and afflictive emotions cause sentient beings to engage in harmful and destructive actions, thus generating the negative karma which results in the continuous cycling through various realms or dimensions of experience that are characterized by various

forms of suffering, ranging from the unbearably excruciating to the very subtle, depending on one's karma. This is what is called cyclic existence, or *samsara*, and there are three types of suffering that are specific to it.

Samsara and the three types of suffering

1. When Shakymuni Buddha first spoke of suffering, he used the Pali word “*dukkha*”, which is a difficult word to translate in English. The etymological roots of the word roughly translate as “bad (*du*) axle hole (*kha*)”, referring to a wheel, such as a potter's wheel, that is not turning smoothly and correctly and is therefore wonky and not working properly. Our lives can be viewed in the context of a wheel, where if the wheel is not turning properly on its axle, we're going to have an uncomfortable, bumpy ride. This is our experience in cyclic existence, sometimes portrayed as “the wheel of life” in Tibetan illustrations, where everything is out of kilter due to ego self-grasping, the three poisons of ignorance, attachment, and aversion, and the inevitable suffering that arises due to our afflictive emotions and negative actions.

2. There are three kinds of suffering that are experienced in cyclic existence: *the suffering of suffering*, *the suffering of change*, and *all-pervasive suffering*. *The suffering of suffering* refers to the various types of physical and mental pain and discomfort that we are all familiar with. *The suffering of change* is the distress we feel as a result of impermanence and change. Nothing stays the same no matter how much we want it to—the new house, the new car, the new job, being comfortable, having loving relationships, having good health. When we do get the things we want, they don't give us lasting happiness because not only do those things change themselves, but our *perception* of them and satisfaction with them changes also. Inevitably we have to let go of everything we feel attachment to and leave it all behind us. The third type of suffering is called *all-pervasive suffering*. As long as we grasp at the delusional idea of an independent self-existence we will be trapped in *samsara* with our contaminated aggregates, and we can never have lasting happiness. Once we have reflected on all of this and understood it for ourselves, we can apply this understanding to others. We will start to feel compassion for them, and think, *I must free all these beings from suffering*.

The path to liberation

1. His Holiness says that to be able to actually free all sentient beings from suffering, we have to change our approach to this life and to our future lives. First, we have to reflect on impermanence, on the certainty of our own death, and on the fact that we can never know how soon we may die. After death, we won't just vanish—the balance of our positive and negative actions will determine how we're reborn. The more positive our actions are the better it will be for us.

2. To free ourselves from the ocean of samsaric suffering, we should begin to study and practice the path to liberation. Realistically speaking, we should plan on probably having to continue our practice over many lives to come. In each of these lives, we'll need a proper support for practice, and that is a human body, without which it will be impossible for us to make progress. The first stage on the path, therefore, is to make sure we have a good human rebirth. Even though our final goal is to achieve enlightenment for all beings, we have to begin the path by training ourselves in the discipline of practicing the ten virtuous actions of body, speech, and mind and avoiding the ten nonvirtuous ones.

3. We start by letting go of our attachment to nonspiritual goals, first in this life and then in future lives. Once we've observed the inherent suffering of samsara, we resolve to free ourselves from it, and as we extend this attitude to other beings, we develop compassion and generate bodhicitta. His Holiness says we have to go through these stages of training the mind in the correct order, like going up a flight of stairs or like building a proper foundation for a house before we build the walls and floors. If we follow the path gradually in this way, the result we have will be stable. But if we simply say the words, "For the sake of all beings I will attain enlightenment..." however strong our wish to help beings might be at that moment, it will not be stable unless it is well founded and grounded in the correct practice of the earlier stages.

4. We should have a clear overall view of the path and its stages, so we can know what we're aiming for with our practice and can recognize the level we're at. As we practice regularly, we can experience profound changes in the way we think, but these experiences only occur when we're concentrating in sessions of meditation. Later, after much studying and meditating, analyzing and thinking, we find that these experiences become habitual and occur spontaneously when we encounter particular circumstances, without needing to concentrate in meditation.

The five paths and ten grounds or *bhumis* of a Bodhisattva

1. For example, after we've meditated on bodhicitta and we've continuously been practicing the six perfections, a change occurs in our minds, but only when we are actually consciously thinking of bodhicitta. This is called a fabricated experience which relies on reasoning and analysis. It's not the bodhicitta of a real Bodhisattva. As we maintain our progress, we reach a point where our minds become habituated to bodhicitta, and the mere sight of an animal or bird or ant or person causes the thought to arise from the depths of our hearts, *when will I ever attain enlightenment for this being?* This is what we call a natural or unlabored experience, and it is at this point true bodhicitta has taken root in us. We can genuinely call ourselves practitioners of the Mahayana path of the Bodhisattva, and are then on what is called the lesser path of the accumulation of merit, or *sonam*. *Sonam* is the positive force and potential that develops and accumulates in someone who practices with a good heart imbued with wisdom.

2. From there we proceed through the middle path of the accumulation of *sonam*, and then begin the greater path of the accumulation of *sonam*. It is said the *path of accumulation*, which is the first of five paths a Bodhisattva traverses to attain Buddhahood, can last for three uncountable eons. But His Holiness says these terms are relative. With the attitude of bodhicitta, such enormous amounts of *sonam* are quickly and easily achieved. All the learned and accomplished masters, from the Buddha through Nagarjuna and his disciples down to our own present teachers, took the practice of considering others more important than themselves as the foundation of their own practice. Through this they were able to benefit themselves and others on a vast scale.

3. When the *path of accumulation* is completed, a Bodhisattva enters into the second path, called the *path of preparation*. Here the Bodhisattva's understanding of emptiness has reached the meditative state of insight where it's not yet a direct perception of emptiness, but a union or joining of calm abiding (*shamatha*) and special insight (*vipashyana*). There is still a very subtle

veil in the mind that is preventing the Bodhisattva from seeing emptiness directly. However, at this stage of the path, it's a full conceptual understanding of emptiness and it has a very strong impact on the mind even though it's not direct. The *path of preparation* is so called because the Bodhisattva is preparing for a direct perception of emptiness. Also on this path, Bodhisattvas keep accumulating *sonam*, so they keep practicing the six perfections, especially the first four—generosity, ethical discipline, patience, and enthusiastic effort (a.k.a. heroic perseverance), because those are the four perfections that are used to accumulate the amount of sonam that's needed for a direct realization of emptiness.

4. When Bodhisattvas get to the point in their meditation where they perceive emptiness directly, they enter the *path of seeing*. In this third path, Bodhisattvas have a direct realization of emptiness. At this point they also achieve the first of ten Bodhisattva grounds or levels, called *bhumis*. 1) This first *bhumi* that occurs on the *path of seeing* is called “the Very Joyful”. The Bodhisattva is very joyful because he or she is on the first *bhumi* plus the path of seeing, and so they rejoice at their own and others' virtue. In particular with this first *bhumi*, Bodhisattvas attain the perfection of generosity.

5. The fourth path that Bodhisattvas continue on, once they've eliminated certain obscurations, is called the *path of meditation*. Remember meditation means to habituate or familiarize, and Bodhisattvas are now really familiarizing their minds with the realization of emptiness and using it to cleanse their minds. They are in the process of eliminating all of the obscurations, both the obscurations to liberation from cyclic existence, called the *afflictive obscurations*, and the obscurations to enlightenment (a.k.a. obscurations to omniscience), called the *cognitive obscurations*. Afflictive obscurations are the seeds of all the disturbing emotions on our mindstream and the karma that causes us to compulsively take rebirth in cyclic existence. Cognitive obscurations are the subtle stains and latencies on our mindstream of ignorance, anger, attachment, jealousy, laziness, pride, all these things. The Bodhisattva is eliminating those subtle latencies and the subtle perception of inherent existence that arises with them.

6. In addition, the remaining nine of the ten *bhumis* are progressively achieved within this fourth *path of meditation*. 2) The second *bhumi* is called “the Stainless”, and with it Bodhisattvas attain the second of the six perfections—the perfection of ethical discipline. This *bhumi* is called “the Stainless” because the Bodhisattva's ten virtuous actions of body, speech, and mind are completely stainless—they have no ethical downfalls at all. 3) The third *bhumi* is called “the Luminous”, where Bodhisattvas attain the perfection of patience. It is called “the Luminous” because the pacifying light of wisdom arises—so the Bodhisattva attains a wisdom that is luminous in their mind. 4) The fourth *bhumi* is called “the Radiant”, where they attain the perfection of enthusiastic effort. It is called “the Radiant” because the light of true wisdom arises and it radiates out. 5) The fifth *bhumi* is “the Very Difficult to Overcome”. Here the Bodhisattva attains the perfection of meditative concentration. It is called “the Very Difficult to Overcome” because demons and any kind of interfering forces find it very difficult to conquer a Bodhisattva with that kind of realization. 6) The sixth *bhumi* is “the Approaching”, where they attain the perfection of wisdom. It is called “the Approaching” because the Bodhisattva is approaching the qualities of the Buddha. That completes the six perfections that are associated with the first six *bhumis*.

7. But at this level of the path there are four more perfections which are an expansion of the sixth perfection of wisdom, and they each have their own *bhumi*. 7) A Bodhisattva on the seventh *bhumi* is called “Gone Afar” and attains the *perfection of skillful means*. This is the ability to tailor one’s speech and actions to benefit sentient beings in ways that are appropriate to each one of them. It is called “Gone Afar” because the number of their qualities has increased so much—it has “gone afar” from what it used to be. 8) The eighth *bhumi* is called “the Immovable”, where the *perfection of prayerful aspiration* is attained. This is a Bodhisattva’s very strong aspiration, almost like a vow, to benefit all beings. It is called “the Immovable” because through non-conceptual wisdom the Bodhisattva is now immovable. 9) The ninth *bhumi* is called “Good Intelligence”, where the *perfection of spiritual power* is attained. This kind of spiritual power or influence is very important in order to be able to guide sentient beings to enlightenment. The ninth ground is called “Good Intelligence” because, like a ruler or governing administrator, the Bodhisattva has attained correct individual realization and therefore has good intelligence. 10) Finally, Bodhisattvas at the tenth *bhumi* are called “the Cloud of Dharma”, because from them a rain of the excellent Dharma falls. It is called “the Cloud of Dharma” because they’re so close to Buddhahood at this point that they’re constantly giving teachings, as if there is a shower of teachings raining down. Here they attain the final *perfection of exalted wisdom* (a.k.a. *the perfection of uncontaminated wisdom*).

8. When all the subtle obscurations to liberation and enlightenment have been eliminated and the ten *bhumis* have been attained, then the Bodhisattva attains the fifth and final path called the *path of no more learning*—so called because you’ve become a Buddha! There is no more learning and no more training. You’re a fully enlightened Buddha. In this way, we gradually traverse the five paths and ten levels or *bhumis* and ultimately attain Buddhahood. These paths and levels are related to our own inner transformation through the practice of bodhicitta.

Impermanence, suffering, and the merely labeled “I”

1. In the last session we were talking about impermanence—how when we observe change in any phenomenon, it appears to us as if there is some kind of inherent entity in that phenomenon that moves through time as various changes to it occur. But Buddhism talks about the continuum of a person or the continuum of a phenomenon like a cup in terms of a series of instants of very subtle impermanence, similar to the way a movie is made up of a series of instants of frames or pixels that are replaced so quickly they appear to form a moving continuum to us.

2. So rather than there being some kind of independently existing “I” that moves through time and space as changes occur *to* it, the “I” is merely the label we assign to a succession of dependently arising instants in an ever-changing continuum or continuity of consciousness. Therefore when we talk about suffering, the merely labeled “I” that suffers in the present moment is different from the merely labeled “I” that will suffer, say, three days from now or three lifetimes from now.

3. Shantideva says, [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’?*” [98] “*To think that ‘I will have to bear it’ Is in fact a false idea. For that which dies is one*

thing; What is born is something else.” Khenpo Kunpel, in his commentary says that when we reflect on our present and future lives in terms of an instantaneously ever-changing continuum, we can see that the entity that dies and passes out of one life is not the same as the entity which is born in the succeeding life. When the mind and body of our human life comes to an end, the mind and body of the following life—whatever kind of mind and body it is—comes into being. It’s not that there is a movement or transmigration of some entity that goes from a former state into a subsequent state.

4. Khenpo Kunpel gives the example of a flame from one lamp that is used to light another lamp. The later flame can’t be lit without depending on the first flame; but at the same time, the first flame does not pass into the second one. It’s not as if the “I” that serves as the mere label for our current continuum of aggregates transfers to the “I” that serves as the mere label for our next life’s continuum of aggregates. What transfers is the subtle imprint of our karmic seeds and habitual propensities that dependently arise instant by instant in our very subtle continuum.

5. Earlier and later instants of consciousness are neither identical nor different—they just instantaneously appear. Consciousness manifests in different ways according to karma, whether good or bad. But in itself, it consists of moments of mere knowing, clear and cognizant, dependently arising uninterruptedly. Any notions of permanence or discontinuity don’t apply to it. So the results of karma are not lost and one never encounters karmic effects that have not been accumulated.

Why should I care about others’ pain?

1. Shantideva then sets up a debate between himself and an opponent: [99] (opponent) “*It’s for the sufferers themselves, you’ll say, ‘To shield themselves from injuries that come!’* (Shantideva) *The pain felt in my foot is not is not my hand’s, So why in fact, should one protect the other?* The opponent objects that it is those who suffer who should protect themselves when they are injured; it is not for others to do so. But Shantideva says the pain the foot feels when it is pierced by a thorn is not felt by the hand. So what reason does the hand have for protecting it? It doesn’t make sense.

2. [100] (opponent) “*True, it’s inadmissible, you’ll say, ‘It happens simply through the force of ego-clinging.’* (Shantideva) *But what is inadmissible for others and myself Should be discarded utterly!*” The hand protecting the foot may not be logical, the opponent says. However, he continues, because people are habituated to self-clinging, they are mentally oriented in such a way that in their present life, they protectively provide for their future existence, and their body’s limbs look after each other. To this, Shantideva replies that the inadmissible clinging to “I” and “other” should be discarded as much as possible, because it’s a delusion.

3. Again the opponent will say that although one’s previous and subsequent existences do not constitute a single entity, they do form a continuum. And although the hand and the foot are separate, nevertheless, they form a single composite. That is why the one protects the other. Shantideva then says, [101] “*Labeled continuities and aggregates, Such as strings of beads and armies, are deceptive and unreal; Likewise, there is no one to experience pain For who is there to be its ‘owner’?* [102] *Suffering has no ‘possessor’, Therefore no distinctions can be made in it. Since pain is pain, it is to be dispelled. What use is there in drawing boundaries?*” Shantideva

is saying that the things we call a “single continuum” or an “aggregate or single composite” are both illusions. A single continuum is nothing more than the coming together of many instants, nothing else—in the same way that the many beads of a necklace strung together are identified as the single continuum of a necklace. As for an aggregate or a single composite, those are just gatherings, as when many armed soldiers grouped together are called an “army”. The label “army” is a figment, something that’s made up; it’s just an imputation or name and does not exist as such.

4. However, Shantideva says, if “I” and “others” have no real existence, who is in pain? Why even try to dispel suffering? Although the labels “I” and “others” have no true independent self-existence, in relative truth everyone wants to avoid suffering. This is a sufficiently good enough reason for dispelling the suffering of others as well as our own. What’s the use in discriminating?

5 [103] (opponent) “*But why dispel the pains of all?*” (Shantideva) *You cannot argue in this way! If ‘my’ pain is removed, so too should that of ‘others’. If theirs is not, then neither should be mine.*” So he’s saying that one cannot argue like this. On the ultimate level of emptiness, yes, the “I” and “others” have no independent self-existence. But on the relative level of the conventional world, we all feel suffering as something that we should get rid of, and it follows that the suffering of others should be removed also. Conversely, if the suffering of others is something that is not to be removed, it follows in similar measure that our own suffering should not be removed either. To remove it would be logically inconsistent.

Will my own compassion for others’ suffering cause me pain?

1. His Holiness the Dalai Lama says we may think if we meditate on compassion and focus on the suffering of others, it will only add to the intense pain we already have. We only think this way because we don’t have a broad enough view of things. If we don’t want to help beings, then their suffering will have no end. But if we can develop a little compassion and make an effort to dispel the suffering of others, then that suffering will have an end. When we develop a broad view and feel compassion for others, this is vastly beneficial, according to His Holiness. Any small difficulties we might experience are worthwhile.

2. [105] “*And if through such a single pain [as my own compassion] A multitude of sorrows can be cured, Such pain as this all loving people Strive to foster in themselves and others.*” The great Bodhisattvas are prepared to do anything, even lose their lives, if it will eradicate the misery of numerous other beings. [107] “*Those whose minds are practiced in this way, Whose joy it is to soothe another’s ills, Will venture into hell of Unrelenting Pain As swans sweep down upon a lotus lake. [107] 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?*” For Bodhisattvas who wear the armor of heroic perseverance and resolve, the joy they have from alleviating the pain of infinite beings is sufficient on its own, even if they suffer a little themselves. How could achieving liberation for ourselves alone, while abandoning our promise to liberate others, be better than that?

3. [109] “*The work of bringing benefit to beings Will not, then, make me proud and self-admiring. The happiness of others is itself my satisfaction; I do not expect another recompense.*” His Holiness say we should never think, *If I help others, I will accumulate*

positive actions. I will be a virtuous person and in the future I'll be happy. This isn't the point. We should engage in positive actions to relieve others' unhappiness, and dedicate these actions to their well-being, from the depth of our hearts, without the slightest thought of future personal reward.

4. [110] *"Therefore just as I defend myself From even slight disparagement, In just the same way with regard to others, I should likewise have a mind protective and compassionate."* Shantideva sums up this part of chapter eight by saying that since he and others are equal without any difference between them, it follows that, just as he defends himself against even the slightest criticism and false accusation, in the same way, he will now repeatedly cultivate and habituate himself to compassion and an attitude of being of benefit, wishing to protect others and to care for them.

Compiled and edited by Tenzin Sherab/Christopher Moroney