

TIBETAN BUDDHISM CENTER FOR WORLD PEACE
San Antonio, Texas

Shantideva's *Bodhicharyavatara*, The Way of the Bodhisattva
Chapter 8: "Meditative Concentration" Part 3

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.

TBCWP Session 9: Sunday, May 7, 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 2

1. Last time we started with the statement by His Holiness the Dalai Lama that bodhicitta is the source of all happiness and joy. This strong desire to attain enlightenment for the benefit of all beings is rooted in compassion and love for all those who are afflicted by suffering. For this compassion and love to be stable, it's necessary for us to have a full understanding of what suffering is, and that all sentient beings suffer in cyclic existence.

2. We talked about the three types of suffering that all sentient beings experience: *the suffering of suffering*, which refers to the various types of physical and mental pain and discomfort that we are all familiar with; *the suffering of change*, which is the distress we feel as a result of impermanence and change; and *all-pervasive suffering*, which refers to the fact that as long as we grasp at our egos' delusions of an independent self-existing "I", we'll be trapped in cyclic existence with our contaminated aggregates and we can never have lasting happiness.

3. Once we've observed the inherent suffering of *samsara*, we resolve to free ourselves from it, and as we extend this attitude to others, we develop compassion for them and generate bodhicitta. His Holiness says if we follow the path gradually as set forth in the *lamrim*, the result we have will be stable, like building a house on a solid foundation. He says it's very important to have a clear overview of the Mahayana path of a Bodhisattva and its stages, so we can know what we're aiming for in our practice.

4. To that end, we talked about the five paths and ten *bhumis*, or levels, that Bodhisattvas must pass through to reach enlightenment. These are: 1) the *path of accumulation*, 2) the *path of preparation*, 3) the *path of seeing*, 4) the *path of meditation*, and 5) the *path of no more learning*. It is during the *path of seeing* and the *path of meditation* that a Bodhisattva brings to completion the six perfections, plus four more perfections which are expansions or extensions of the sixth one. Each of these completed ten perfections are related to ten levels in which the Bodhisattva successively dwells, called the ten *bhumis*. When all five paths and ten *bhumis* have been attained, the Bodhisattva becomes a fully enlightened Buddha.

5. We also talked about how there is no inherently existing “I” or “other”. When we observe any phenomenon, whether it’s consciousness or form—whether it’s a person, or a pencil, or a planet—it appears to us as if there’s some kind of inherent entity in that phenomenon that moves through time as various changes occur to it. But Buddhism talks about the continuum of any phenomenon 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.

6. Consciousness is the phenomenon that is aware, cognizes, and experiences. 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 always consists of moments of mere knowing, clear and cognizant, dependently arising instantaneously. “I” and “other” are just labels we assign to a succession of dependently arising instants that connect ever-changing continuities of consciousness. The continuity of consciousness that experiences suffering or happiness in the present moment as, say, a human being, is different from the continuity of consciousness that will experience suffering or happiness as that same human being three days from now, or three lifetimes from now—when the karma of that same continuity of consciousness causes it to be experienced perhaps as an animal, or ghost, or ethereal being.

7. This throws interesting light on the Buddhist teachings on reincarnation and karma (subjects which are often misunderstood), and shows how these are in agreement with the view that neither persons nor things possess an essential core that is solid and unchanging. It gives us the transcendent, metaphysical basis that’s needed for the meditation on equality of self and other, and the whole practice of compassion according to Mahayana Buddhism.

Equalizing self and other

1. [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.”* In his commentary to this text, Khenpo Kunpel says there are two things to be practiced on the level of relative bodhicitta: meditation on the equality of self and other, and meditation on the exchange of self and other. If we don’t train in the *equality* of self and other, the *exchange* of self and other is impossible. That’s why Shantideva says we should first strive to meditate on equality of self and other; for without it, a perfectly pure altruistic attitude of bodhicitta can’t arise.

2. All beings, including ourselves, are exactly the same in wanting to be happy and not wanting to suffer. In addition, all beings think in terms of “I” and “mine”, although there’s no basis in ultimate reality for thinking this way. Because of this, we all have a conception of “other” as something alien to us—although this too has no basis in ultimate reality. “I” and “other” are totally unreal. They are both illusory, like a mirage or hallucination. They are merely mental imputations or labels. When the nonexistence of “I” is realized, the idea or concept of “other” also disappears, because “other” is only posited in relation to the thought of “I”.

3. Just as it’s impossible to cut the sky in two with a knife, when the space-like quality of egolessness is realized, it’s no longer possible to separate “I” and “other”. An attitude of wanting to love and protect others as oneself will naturally arise in us. It’s said that whoever casts aside

the ordinary, trivial view of self, will discover the state in which the duality of self and other is totally transcended. So, to have the realization of the equality of “I” and “other”, it’s crucial to grasp that “I” and “other” are mere labels without any basis in reality. This vital point of egolessness is difficult to understand, even for a person of high intelligence. So it’s very important that egolessness be clearly shown, taken into the mind, and understood.

4. [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.”* We can reflect upon equality in this way: the various parts of our bodies—hands, feet, head, inner organs, cells, and so on, can all be distinguished separately. Nevertheless, in a moment of danger, we protect them all, not wanting any of them to be hurt, because they all form a single body. We think, “This is *my* body,” and we cling to it, protecting it as a whole and regarding it as a single entity. In the same way, the whole aggregate of beings throughout numberless realms and universes who are all like us in wanting to be happy and not wanting to suffer, should be identified as a single entity, our big “I”. We should protect them from suffering in just the same way that we now protect ourselves.

5. If we were to ask someone how many bodies they had, they’d say, “What are you talking about? I only have one body!” If we continued by asking, “Well, are there many bodies that you should be taking care of?” they would probably say, “No, I only take care of this one body of mine.” And this is what most of us would probably say, but the fact is that when we talk about “my body,” we’re merely applying a name to a collection of different items. The word *body* doesn’t refer at all to a single indivisible whole, so there’s no real reason why the name *body* should not be extended to include others.

6. It is the mind that says “*my* body” or “*my* self,” and it’s on the basis of this idea of a single entity that it’s possible to put forth and consider the general concepts of “I” and “mine”. To say that it is reasonable to attach the name “I” to “this aggregate,” and not to “another aggregate,” is actually baseless. Therefore the name “I” can be applied just as well to the whole collection of suffering beings. It is possible for the mind to think, “They are myself.” If our minds become habituated to this, the idea of “I” with regard to other sentient beings will in fact arise, and we’ll come to care for one another as much as each one of us now cares for ourself.

There is no separation between “my suffering” and “another’s suffering”

1. Since beginningless time until now, our minds have entered into the generative substances of our parents as they came together. Following that, there came into being what each of us identify as “my body”. It’s precisely because we think of it as “myself” that we cannot tolerate its pain or injury. But when we speak of suffering itself, there is no separation between “my suffering” and “another’s suffering.” Although another’s suffering doesn’t actually cause me pain now, if that other is identified as “I” or “mine”, their suffering becomes unbearable to me also.

2. We can see this in the example of a mother who would rather die than see her baby tormented with sickness and suffering. Because she identifies with her baby so much, the child’s suffering is actually unbearable for *her*. Other people who don’t identify with the child are for this very reason unaffected by its pain. If they did identify with it, the child’s suffering would be intolerable for them as well.

3. A long period of habituation isn't necessary for this kind of experience to occur for us. Khenpo Kunpel takes the example of a horse that is being put up for sale. Right up until the moment the deal is made, if the horse lacks grass or water, or if it is ill, or if it has any other discomfort—all this will be unbearable for its owner, while it will not at all affect the client. But as soon as the transaction takes place, it is the buyer who will be unable to tolerate the horse's suffering, while the seller will be completely indifferent. Within the horse itself, there isn't any basis for the distinction "this person's horse" or "that person's horse". The horse is identified as being this person's or that person's according to how it is labeled by thought.

4. In a similar way, there isn't any reason why the notion of "I" must be applied to me and not to another. "I" and "other" are no more than conceptual labels. The "I" of myself is "other" for someone else, and what is "other" for myself is "I" for another. The concepts of "here" and "there" are just points of view, designated by the mind in dependence on each other. There is no such thing as an absolute "here" or an absolute "there", just as there is no such thing as an absolute "I" or an absolute "other". And so, because of this crucial point, the Dharma teaches that when the designation "I" is associated and combined with other sentient beings, the attitude of accepting and taking them as one's own will naturally arise.

5. This is how Buddhas and Bodhisattvas identify with sentient beings as their own selves. As was said before with Khenpo Kunpel's example of selling and buying a horse, taking sentient beings as one's own does not require lengthy training. Still we may think that because we have such bad mental habits, the thought of taking others as oneself will never arise. But the Buddha said that in all the world he never saw anything easier to educate than the mind itself, once it is set on the right path and steps are taken to bring it under control. On the other hand, the Buddha also said there is nothing more difficult to control than an untrained mind. So, if we don't allow our minds stray to wrong paths but train them, it's perfectly possible to bring them under control.

Exchanging self and other

1. Khenpo Kunpel's commentary on stanzas 140 to 154 of chapter 8 is an explanation of exchanging self and other. In these stanzas Shantideva helps us understand how we can use our sympathetic imagination to place ourselves in the position of others. By doing this, we gain an appreciation of how we appear in others' eyes, and of how and why they feel the way they do.

2. [140] *"Take others—lower, higher, equal—as yourself, Identify yourself as "other". Then, without another thought, Immerse yourself in envy, pride, and rivalry."* When we engage in this meditation of exchange, we take other beings—whether we perceive them to be our inferiors, superiors, or equals—and consider them as ourselves, putting ourselves in their position. When we have changed places, we meditate without allowing any other thought to come in the way. First, we put ourselves in the position of someone who we see as worse off than us and allow ourselves to feel their resentful envy toward us. Next, we put ourselves in the position of someone who we see as a competitor—on the same level as us—and allow ourselves to soak in their sense of competitiveness and rivalry with us. Finally, we take the place of someone who we perceive to be better off than us, and allow ourselves to feel their pride and condescension toward us.

3. Using each of these three meditations, we systematically generate the antidotes to arrogant pride, jealous rivalry, and resentful envy. The reason for doing this is that as soon as even the slightest kind of virtue appears in our mind-stream, these three defilements follow in its trail. Pride, rivalry, and envy are like demons that eat away at our good character and integrity, which is why applying their antidotes is so important.

Practicing envy from the point of view of someone less well off

1. Of the eight worldly concerns, there are four of them—being recognized, having possessions, receiving praise, and having pleasure—that can make us proud and arrogant. None of us would choose to be seen as pitiful and wretched. So to perform this exchange, place yourself in the position of someone like that—a homeless beggar, or a homeless prostitute, or a homeless street person. Imagine that you become the homeless person and that homeless person becomes you, nearby and inattentive to the homeless person. Now allow yourself to feel the homeless person’s resentment and envy toward you.

2. [141] *“That person’s the center of attention. I am nothing. And, unlike that person, I’m poor without possessions. Everyone looks up to that person, despising me, All goes well for that person; for me there’s only bitterness!”* Looking up at your former self (now regarded as someone else), think how happy that person must be, well off and respected. You on the other hand are nothing, nobody, a complete down-and-out, despised and utterly miserable. The person you are looking at has plenty to eat, good clothes to wear, money to spend—while you have nothing. That person is respected for being capable, well disciplined, contributing to society. You, on the other hand are dismissed as a loser, a deviant, shameful. That person enjoys comfort and happiness; you have nothing but the clothes on your back, your mind weighed down with worries, your body sick and suffering the discomforts of heat and cold.

3. [142] *“All I have is sweat and drudgery, While that person’s there, sitting at ease. That person’s great, respected in the world, While I’m the underdog, a well-known nobody.”* You have nothing but a life of drudgery and discomfort—while that person can just sit back and enjoy their life. That person has money, meaningful work, a family, and friends. You on the other hand are a complete nobody, without distinction, well known to be good at nothing. As these thoughts pass through your mind, feel your resentment and envy growing.

4. [143] *“What! A nobody without distinction? Not true! I do have some good qualities. Compared with some, that person’s lower down. Compared with some, I do excel!”* Even though you have nothing to show for yourself, you might well ask *that person* what reason they have to be so arrogant. After all, the existence or nonexistence of good qualities and concepts of high and low are all relative. There are no absolute values. Even people who are down-and-out like you can be found to have something good about them, relatively speaking. Compared to someone with even greater capabilities, *that person* is not so great. Compared with someone even more destitute, feeble with age, lame, blind and so forth, you are much better-off. After all, you can still walk on your own two feet; you can see with your eyes; you are not yet crippled with age. You have at least something.

5. [144] *“My discipline, my understanding have declined, But I am helpless, ruled by my defilements. Much as that person is able, they should cure me. I will be submissive even to that person’s punishments.”* If that person retorts that you are despicable because your discipline and understanding are a disgrace, or that you have no resources and so forth, this is not because you are evil in yourself, or that you are just inept; it is because your afflictions of desire, ignorance, avarice, and so on are so powerful that you are helpless. And so you should retort, saying: Alright, if you’re such a great and wonderful Bodhisattva, you should help me as much as you can; you should encourage and remedy the poor condition of my discipline, view, and resources. If you *do* help me, I’m even prepared to accept punishment from you—harsh words and disciplining—just like a child at school learning to read and write who has to be disciplined by their teacher.

6. [145] *“The fact is that person does nothing of the sort! By what right, then, does that person belittle me? What use, then are that person’s qualities to me—Those qualities of which they’re so possessed?”* The fact is that you, the great Bodhisattva, are doing nothing for me; you don’t give me money or even a scrap of food or something to drink. So why are you passing yourself off as someone so great? You have no right to look down on me, no right to behave so scornfully to me and to people like me. And anyway, even if you *did* have any genuine virtues, if you can’t give me any relief or help, what use are they to me? They’re totally irrelevant.

7. [146] *“Indifferent to the plight of living beings, Who tread the brink of evil destinies, That person makes an outward show of virtues, And even wants to vie with sages.”* After all, if you are a Bodhisattva but can stand by without the slightest intention of helping and saving me and those like me, who through the power of our evil karma are on our way to the lower realms like falling into mouth of a ferocious beast—if you have no compassion, you are yourself guilty of something completely unspeakable! But not only do you not acknowledge this, you are all the time passing yourself off as someone wonderful. The fact is, however, that you have no qualities at all. In your arrogance, you want to put yourself on the same level as the real Bodhisattvas, those beings who are truly skilled and who in their compassion really do carry the burdens of others. Your behavior is totally outrageous!

8. This is how Shantideva instructs us to meditate on envy and resentment as the chief antidote to arrogant pride. By appreciating the suffering involved in being an insignificant and destitute person, humiliated and unable to make a living, we come to realize how wrong it is to be arrogant and scornful. It dawns on us how unpleasant it is for someone who is in a disadvantaged position when we’re being patronizing toward them, or just looking the other way. We should stop behaving like this and begin to treat people with respect, providing for them as we are able to, and helping them in practical ways.

Practicing rivalry from the point of view of an equal

1. Next, we make the exchange by taking the place of someone equal to, or slightly better than ourselves—someone who we feel we are in competition with, whether at work, in our family, or any other kind of situation that we’re involved in. This could be a situation we’re currently experiencing, or something from our past. The important thing is to really make it personal. Again, as in the previous meditation, imagine that you are your rival, who is seeing you—*that person*—as their competitor. Allow yourself to feel your rival’s sense of competition with you.

[147] *“That I might excel, outstripping that person—That person, regarded as my peer and equal! In contests I will certainly secure My fame and fortune, public renown.”* Tell yourself that, however good that person is in terms of status and ability, you will do better. Whatever it is they possess, and whatever respect they may have in other people’s eyes, you will deprive that person of those things, whether in intellectual disputes and debates or even by fighting—and you will make sure you get them all for yourself.

2. [148] *“By every means I’ll advertise My gifts to all the world, Ensuring that person’s qualities Remain unknown, ignored by everyone.”* In every way possible, you will advertise far and wide your own good qualities, talents, and know-how, while hushing up whatever good qualities that person has, so that no one will ever see or hear about them.

3. [149] *“My faults I will conceal, and hide under a false appearance. For I, not that person, will be the object of esteem; I, not that person, will gain possessions and renown, I will be the center of attention.”* You will cover up whatever faults you have, hiding them from the public gaze, while at the same time gossiping about all the shortcomings of your rival, making quite sure that everyone knows about them. Under the impression that you are beyond reproach, lots of people will believe you, while for that person it will be just the opposite. From now on, you will be the successful one, the center of attention. For that person, there will be nothing.

4. [150] *“I will take such satisfaction In that person’s evil deeds and degradation. I will render that person despicable, The butt and laughingstock of everyone.”* For a long time, and with intense satisfaction, you will gloat over the humiliation that person will have to endure because of their failures. You will cause that person to be an object of scorn and ridicule, and in public gatherings you will make that person disreputable in the eyes of others, digging out and exposing all their secret foibles.

5. By using a spirit of rivalry in this way as an antidote to jealousy, we will come to recognize our own faults in being competitive with others. Then we’ll stop behaving like this and instead do whatever we can to help our rivals with generosity and appreciation.

Practicing pride from the point of view of someone better-off

1. Now imagine yourself in the position of someone who you consider to be better-off than you, who looks down on you with pride and derision—perhaps a boss or manager, or a client or customer of yours who is particularly self-important and overbearing. [151] *“People say this pitiful nonentity Is trying to compete with me! But how can that person be on a par With me, in learning, beauty, wealth, or pedigree?”* Think that it has come to your notice that this person, this tiresome nonentity, is trying to put themselves on a par with *you*. But what comparison could anyone possibly make between you and this person—whether in learning or intelligence, in good looks, social class, wealth, and possessions? The whole idea is ridiculous. It’s like comparing the earth with the sky! [152] *“Just to hear them talk about my excellence, My reputation on the lips of all, The thrill of it sends shivers down my spine, A pleasure that I bask and revel in!”* Hearing everyone talking about your talents, about all your learning and so on, saying how it sets you apart from such an abject individual, all this is extremely gratifying. The thrill of it is so intense that your skin is covered in goose bumps!

[153] *“Even if this person does have something, I’m the one they’re working for! This person can keep enough just to survive, But with my strength I’ll steal the rest away.”* If through their own hard work, and despite obstacles, this person manages to make some headway, you agree that, so long as they abase themselves and work subserviently according to your instructions, this low-down wretch will get no more than the merest necessities that are due to them. But as for any extras, you, being in a stronger position, will confiscate them and deprive this person of them. [154] *“I will wear this person’s happiness away; I will always hurt and injure them. This person’s the one who in samsara Did me mischiefs by the hundred!”* So why is it that you’re being so vicious? It’s because of all the many hundreds of times this person (your own ego) has harmed you while you were wandering in samsara. Alternately, this stanza could be explained as meaning that you will wear away the satisfaction of this self-cherishing mentality and constantly undermine it, because this self-centered attitude has brought you suffering so many hundreds of times in the realms of samsara. This is how Shantideva shows the fault of not being rid of pride.

3. When people who are in a position of superiority behave proudly and insult us with their arrogant attitude, we think: *why are these people being so arrogant and offensive?* But instead of being resentful and angry, we should change places with them. Using Shantideva’s meditation on pride, we should place ourselves in that position of superiority, and ask ourselves whether *we* have the same feelings of pride and condescension. And if we find that we too are proud and condescending, and we too have scorn and contempt for those we feel that *we’re* better than (like those powerful public figures we love to hate and ridicule, or other drivers on the road who we have no problem calling “jerks” or “idiots” or “assholes”), we’ll be able to look at those who are now behaving arrogantly toward *us* and think, *Well, yes, I can see why they feel the way they do.* And so we’ll treat them respectfully, avoiding attitudes of rivalry and contention.

Conclusion

1. In conclusion to his commentary on this chapter, His Holiness the Dalai Lama says that putting ourselves in the place of others is very helpful for seeing the faults of the egotistic “I”, and we will become deeply disgusted with it. We should make our practice of these meditations vivid and real, and remind ourselves of all the negative actions the “I” has made us do, all the harm it has done us, making us suffer and causing endless suffering for others as well. *This is our real enemy.* Up until now, we’ve let ourselves be dominated by our clinging to “I”. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if we could make it disappear altogether? Wouldn’t we be genuinely proud if we could break it and render it powerless? We should follow in the footsteps of the Bodhisattvas, those compassionate heirs of the Buddhas, and patiently practice day and night. If we can do that, it is certain our suffering will one day come to an end.

[184] *“Therefore, free from all attachment, I will give this body for the benefit of beings. And though it is affected by so many faults, I shall adopt it as my necessary tool. [186] Like the Buddhas’ heirs, in their compassion, I will bear with all that should be borne. For if I do not labor night and day, When will my sorrows reach their end? [187] Thus to banish all obscuring veils I’ll bend my mind from the mistaken path; And constantly upon the perfect object I shall rest my mind in even meditation.”*

Compiled and edited by Tenzin Sherab/Christopher Moroney