

**Commentary on
Shantideva's "A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life"
Chapter 1: The Benefit of the Spirit of Awakening (Bodhicitta) - Part 1 of 4
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Cultivating a positive motivation for listening to teachings

Before we begin, let's spend a moment to cultivate our motivation. Let's remember the kindness that we've received from all sentient beings, how our very life, everything we have, everything we know depends on the kindness of others, and let's generate the wish to repay that kindness.

We may give them gifts or say nice things about them, but the real way to repay all sentient beings' kindness is to be able to lead them on the path to enlightenment.

In order to do that, we have to work on ourselves first – purify our own minds, cultivate our hearts, attain enlightenment ourselves. So let's generate that bodhicitta motivation to become a fully enlightened Buddha in order to be able to benefit all sentient beings most effectively.

Contemplate that for a minute and put what we're about to do within that very long term and very noble purpose.

Introduction to the text and the author

This text, the *Bodhicaryavatara* in Sanskrit is one of my favorite texts. It is also a favorite text of a number of other people. I think His Holiness the Dalai Lama loves this text. When Geshe Sopa, one of my teachers sets a motivation, he usually quotes a verse from this text. It's a very inspiring, wonderful text.

It was written by Shantideva, who lived in the 8th century in ancient India. He was from a royal family and he was all set to assume the throne after his father. They were preparing for the coronation, so you can imagine all this pomp and ceremony that was going on.

But right before he was sent to the throne, two bodhisattvas, Manjushri and Tara, appeared to him and said, "It's not very wise to become King. You can benefit others a lot more if you practice the Dharma." Hearing this, he left instead of becoming the King.

Can you imagine doing that? It's like in your businesses, you're all set to become the CEO and have the highest pay that you could ever get, and you split to go practice the Dharma. Think of that. This is big stuff that Shantideva did!

So he left, went into the forest and began to practice there. He attained very high levels of samadhi and also gained some psychic powers, amongst which was the ability to see the bodhisattva Manjushri, so he was able to ask Manjushri his Dharma questions whenever he needed to.

After practicing for a while, he came out of the forest and became a minister to another King. He advised the King on how to rule the kingdom in accordance with the Dharma and so was able to benefit sentient beings in that way. But some of the other ministers got jealous, and started talking behind his back. So he resigned his position as minister and went to Nalanda monastery.

Shantideva at Nalanda Monastery

In ancient India, there were enormous monasteries with thousands of monks that were actually like universities. I recently learnt that there were also some nuns there. The residents were principally Buddhists, but there were also some non-Buddhists. They did lots of debating vigorously, thinking about the path to enlightenment.

Shantideva went to Nalanda Monastery and ordained as a monk. He wrote two books. One of them was *Sikhsasamuccaya*. The other was *Sutrasamuccaya*. But he did this all very secretly.

Shantideva did his studies very secretly, so it appeared to the common people that all he ever did was three things: eat, sleep and go to the bathroom. He became known at the monastery as the person who did only these three things, because people were just looking superficially and so they thought, "Oh, what a lazy monk. He just eats, sleeps and go to the bathroom. He doesn't do anything good. The rest of us are working so hard. We're studying. But this guy is just some lazy slob!"

They wanted to kick him out of the monastery but they needed to find an excuse to do it. So they thought, "Oh, well, we'll invite him to give a teaching. He will, of course, not be able to do it, and we'll use that as a reason to get him out of the monastery!"

So they invited Shantideva to give a teaching. They made a very high throne but didn't provide any stairs, hoping to embarrass him because he wouldn't be able to get onto it.

Shantideva taught this text

Shantideva turned up to give the teaching. The throne was very high but he put his hand on it, lowered it and sat on it, and then the throne went back up. Seeing this, the monks knew something was going on there.

Then Shantideva asked them what kind of teaching they wanted to hear, and they said, "Well, we want to hear something new." So he said, "Ok, I'll teach you something that I've composed."

He then began to recite this text, "A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life." He went on and on, and when he got to chapter nine, which is the chapter on emptiness, he began to rise up into the sky. As he spoke about how all things are empty of inherent existence, he went higher and higher and eventually disappeared from view. But they could still hear his voice. It was quite an astonishing thing.

Shantideva left Nalanda monastery

Shantideva didn't come back to Nalanda after teaching the text. He had disappeared. Different people in the audience heard the teachings slightly differently and they couldn't agree on what version to write down. They knew that what he had said was something special, but they couldn't agree on how to write it down. They found out that he had gone to a certain city, so they followed him there and they asked him which was the correct version of the text. He told them, and he also told them where to find the other two books that he had written.

After that, being a forest meditator, Shantideva disappeared into the forest again. He lived in a forest monastery where there was a lot of wild life. The other monks would see animals going into his room but never saw them leaving. They thought, "Oh, he's killing the animals and maybe eating them," so they got very agitated and very angry at him. Somehow Shantideva had this karma where the other monks in the monastery would project wrong things on him. He was accused again and he left the monastery.

Shantideva left the monastery but he continued to benefit sentient beings in whatever ways he possibly could. He spent his life dedicated to serving others.

One of his major contributions was this book that he wrote, which in English is translated as “A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life”.

The teachers from whom Ven. Chodron received these teachings

The first time I received this teaching was from His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and I think it must have been in 1979. It was held in Bodhgaya, India. They had a big tent coming out from the Tibetan monastery. There were thousands of people there. I was squished in with the nuns and we were sitting mostly out in the sun as the canopy didn't come as far as where we were.

His Holiness taught for about four hours a day. We were sitting in the sun, and there was no English translation. It was all in Tibetan. I was among the first batch of non-Tibetans who became ordained in the Tibetan system, so at that time they weren't used to having English speakers around. So I sat there hour after hour, not understanding anything, but knowing that it was still good to be there [laughter]. They say that you receive the oral transmission that way. Just by hearing the text, hearing the words, that makes an imprint on the mind. So I think I must have been like the fleas and the dogs in the area, just getting the imprint because I didn't understand anything.

But years later, I was able to study this text with Geshe Sopa, and again with His Holiness, and that time, it was in English, so I began to understand at least the words. However, understanding the meaning is a whole other ballgame. So we will make an effort to understand the words and the meaning as best as we can, but we should know that it's going to take a long time to really understand this.

Three-step process of learning the Dharma

The way we learn the Buddha's teachings, the Dharma, is different from the way we learn regular subjects in school. In school, we learn stuff, we memorize it, and then at the test, we tell the teacher what they already know. But when we learn the Dharma, we don't do things like that. We try and remember what we've heard and then we go home and put it into practice. The teacher doesn't quiz us because it's our own responsibility to contemplate the teachings and to put them into practice.

Learning the Dharma is a three-stage process. We start off with hearing the teachings, which is what you're doing now. Then when you go home, you think about them, you discuss them with other people. In that way, you make sure that you have the correct understanding. The third step is to meditate on them and to actually put them into practice.

Some people like to skip the first stage of hearing the teachings and go straight to the meditation stage. But if you don't learn how to meditate, then you don't know what to meditate on. Therefore it's important to learn first.

There are others who learn but don't meditate. Their mind doesn't change and they become like a walking encyclopedia. When they have problems in their life, they don't know what to do to solve their own problems. For that reason, it's good to also reflect and meditate on the teachings after hearing them.

How to listen to the teachings: the analogy of the three types of pots

In the *lamrim* teachings, the analogy of the three types of pots is used to illustrate improper ways of hearing the teachings.

Upside down pot

The first type of pot is a pot that is turned upside down. You might have delicious nectar but if you try pouring it into the pot, nothing goes in. We are like an upside down pot when we fall asleep while listening to teachings. Although we're in the room, nothing is going in.

Or it could be that our mind is completely distracted, "Oh, that guy over there, he's really good-looking!" Again you're in the room but your mind is not listening to the teachings. Nothing is going in. So that's like a pot that's upside down. We don't want to be like that.

Pot with a hole

The next kind of pot is right side up, but it has a hole at the bottom. When you pour delicious nectar in, it will all leak out from the bottom. This is an analogy for the person who listens to teachings, is fully awake and not distracted by any good-looking guy, but afterwards, when somebody comes up and asks, "Oh, what were the teachings about?", they go, "Ah.... Buddhism!" [laughter]

They can't remember anything from the teachings. So they're like the pot with a hole at the bottom. We don't want to be like that one either.

Filthy pot

The third kind of pot is right side up, has no hole at the bottom, but it's completely filthy inside. If you pour delicious nectar in, you can't drink it because it's mixed in with all the rubbish inside the pot. This is an analogy for the person who comes and learns the teachings but they're full of wrong views that they hold on to very stubbornly. They also come to the teachings with the wrong motivation, thinking, "I'll listen to the teachings and then I can give the teachings myself." They're hearing a very pure teaching, but it gets polluted by their wrong motivation and wrong views. We also don't want to be like that. That's why we started tonight's session with cultivating a proper motivation for coming and thinking seriously about that.

Overview of the text

We'll be spending four evenings focusing on the first chapter: "The benefits of the bodhicitta mind". Let me first give you an overview of the whole text.

The first, second and third chapters deal very much with the benefits of bodhicitta, how to generate bodhicitta, how to generate that wonderful motivation, and how to use it in our lives. They set the stage for the practice of generosity, because this text is basically about the six perfections or the six far-reaching attitudes, or the six paramitas in Sanskrit. The first of these six paramitas is generosity, and the first three chapters are along that line.

The fourth and fifth chapters talk about how to live bodhicitta in our daily life, so that's talking about ethical discipline, which is the second far-reaching attitude.

Chapter six is the one I know best. I know the words best; I can't say I practice it the best. This chapter is about patience, in other words, how to deal with our anger. I learnt this practice very well over my life, because I have a big problem with anger. Whenever I get angry, I will go back and study chapter six.

Chapter seven is about joyous effort, which is the fourth far-reaching attitude.

Chapter eight is about meditation and it's a wonderful chapter. I like that chapter very much as well.

Chapter nine is about wisdom, that's the one where Shantideva disappeared in the sky when he was teaching it.

Chapter ten is dedication, which again comes back to the practice of generosity of giving our merit away.

Basic Buddhist principles: understanding the world view from which Shantideva is speaking

What I'd like to do now before I get into the text is to talk about some basic Buddhist principles so we have the background and we know the setting and the worldview from which Shantideva is speaking.

I've noticed that His Holiness the Dalai Lama always begins teachings by giving this kind of background – talking about the Four Noble Truths, the four seals, the two truths, and other related topics, to make sure that the people who are listening have the framework: the Buddhist worldview.

I think this is very important, because all the teachings we hear only make sense if we have the Buddhist worldview. If we don't have that worldview, then the teachings may sound wonderful but we won't really value them and we won't know how to put them into practice.

I see this happening a lot with people who want very high teachings. Everybody comes in, "I want the highest teaching!" In the case of the Tibetan tradition, it's, "I want to hear mahamudra, the highest class of tantra and dzogchen. Give me an initiation. I want the high teachings." These people hear these high teachings and they may even remember some words, but when it comes to their daily life, they don't know how to make their life meaningful. And that's because they don't have that worldview. So I want to talk a little about this worldview.

What is mind?

To understand the Buddhist worldview, we have to understand what the mind is. When I say the word 'mind', I'm not talking about the brain. The brain is a physical organ. You can measure the brain with scientific instruments. You can measure the electricity in the brain. You can measure the serotonin and the various chemical reactions in the brain. But the brain is not the mind. The brain is part of the body. The mind is something totally different from the body. The mind is what makes us living beings.

Most of you have probably seen dead bodies. A dear one has died. The body of your loved one is there, but they're not there, are they? Something is missing. What is it that is missing that makes us conclude that the person is no longer there? It's their consciousness or mind. The presence of consciousness makes somebody a living being. In the case of a corpse, the brain is still there in the corpse but the mind is no longer there.

Mind is clear and aware

The mind is unlike the brain in that the mind is not atomic. It's not made of atoms and molecules. It's not made of material. The definition of mind is clear and aware. 'Clear' can mean that it's formless, in other words, it's not made of matter. 'Clear' can also mean that it has the power to reflect objects.

The other quality of mind is that it's aware or it's knowing. Which means that it can know objects. It can engage with objects. This ability to reflect and engage with various objects is what makes one a sentient being. That's the definition of mind.

The mind, by its very nature, can know objects. From the mind's side, just by being clear and knowing, there's the potential for it to reflect and engage in all objects, in absolutely everything that exists.

Our mind is obscured by ignorance

However, as sentient beings, our minds are very obscured. That obscuration prevents us from knowing everything. We have the potential to be omniscient but we're not omniscient right now because the mind is obscured.

What is it that obscures our mind? It's not like a blindfold that prevents our eyes from seeing. It's not a physical obscuration. It's the obscuration of wrong conceptions, the obscuration of ignorance, the obscuration of disturbing attitudes and negative emotions. These kinds of wrong views and distorted consciousnesses obscure the clear and knowing nature of our mind. Therefore we can't see everything. These afflictive states of mind, these disturbing attitudes and negative emotions also cause us a ton of suffering. They not only obscure the mind so that we can't actualize our potential, but they also cause us a great deal of suffering.

When our mind is overwhelmed by ignorance, we're dull. We can't engage. We become close-minded. This ignorance misconceives who we are, so it develops a whole lot of wrong ideas about who we are. We think that there's some solid, concrete thing that's *me*. We think that there's a soul or that there's some essence of *me-ness* there when there isn't. We think we are an independent person and everybody else is an independent person. We think that everything we see and engage in is independent, each having its own nature. This kind of wrong conception is what we call 'ignorance'. We often don't realize it because we've been ignorant for so long that we think it's normal.

Repercussions of ignorance

This kind of ignorance has many repercussions. One of them is if we think that there's a very solid person that's *me*, that there is a real *me* here, then of course *my* happiness becomes the most important thing. So then attachment arises.

Attachment arises

Attachment is a mind that exaggerates the good qualities of someone or something and it craves for and clings to and wants that person or thing. I call it the 'bubble gum' mind. You know how bubble gum sticks to everything? The mind of attachment is like that. It sees something and, "Oh! This is good. I want it for myself!" We get this mind that is very greedy and very clingy, that's craving and just full of desire.

Now we shouldn't confuse attachment with having positive aspirations, because positive aspirations are very useful and very beneficial. A positive aspiration to develop a kind heart or a positive aspiration to become a Buddha is not attachment. They are both good aspirations to have. There is no exaggeration involved when you aspire to become a Buddha. When you aspire to develop a kind heart, you're not exaggerating the value of a kind heart and clinging to it in a non realistic way.

On the other hand, when we think of money, for example, then our mind exaggerates its importance. We have a lot of wrong conceptions about money and we get attached to it.

What are the wrong conceptions we have about money? Well, we think that money is the meaning of life: "If I have a lot of money, then life is valuable." That's a wrong conception.

Or we think that money brings happiness. But there are many people who are not very happy although they have a lot of money.

So you can see that when we get attached to something, there's exaggeration involved. That exaggeration creates the clinging. The clinging in turn creates a lot of suffering. How is it so? When we can't get what we want, we're unhappy. Even if we do get what we want, when we're separated from it later on, we're unhappy. Or if we get the opposite of what we want, we're unhappy.

Anger arises

So we can see how the clinging, the attachment creates a great deal of suffering in our life. You can also experience this, can't you? We've all had times when we say, "Oh, I want this!" but we can't get it, and we feel totally miserable. Not only are we miserable, we are also angry. "The world's unfair! I want this and I can't get it! This is all everybody else's fault!" We get very upset and our behavior becomes quite obnoxious.

The three poisonous attitudes obscure our mind and create suffering

This is why when we talk about the three poisonous minds, it refers to these three. The first is ignorance. That gives rise to clinging attachment, because we want our own happiness. When we can't get our own happiness, then we get angry or hostile. So attachment and anger or hostility are the second and third of the three poisonous attitudes respectively.

These three poisonous attitudes, together with all of their branches become the obscurations in our mind that prevent us from being happy.

A fundamental difference between Buddhism and the theistic religions

When the Buddha taught, he described what was happening and taught the way to happiness. The Buddha did not create the path to happiness. He simply described it. Here we see a big difference between Buddhism and the theistic religions. In theistic religions like Judaism, Christianity and Islam, there's a creator God who created everything. In Buddhism, there's no external being that is the creator. Instead we say that it's our own mind that creates what we experience. Our mind creates our happiness and our suffering.

When we're suffering, the part of our mind that's creating that is the ignorance, anger and attachment.

When we experience happiness, the part of the mind that is creating that is the mind that's kind and generous and wise.

We can see that there is a fundamental difference in approach between Buddhism and the theistic religions. In the theistic religions, there's a creator God and we only exist because God made us. The way to happiness is therefore to propitiate God – to make prayers, to praise God – in the hope that God will do something good for you. That's the way you practice. That's the path in the theistic religions.

In Buddhism, it's not like that. We don't petition any kind of external being to bring us happiness because we don't believe that an external being is the cause of our suffering. We say instead that it's our own distorted mind which is the cause of suffering because there are many logical fallacies in saying that some other being were the cause of our suffering. As Buddhists, we use reason and logic in our path, so we don't assert any kind of external creator. Our own mind creates the happiness and the misery.

Our mind creates happiness and misery in two ways

Our own mind creates happiness and misery in two ways. One way is by how we interpret the thing and how we relate to an object right now.

If I exaggerate the value of an object, I create suffering for myself because I develop so much longing, wanting, craving, clinging. If I exaggerate the negative qualities of an object, I suffer right now because my mind is full of anger and resentment holding a grudge. So that is one way the mind creates suffering.

Another way that the mind creates our suffering is that through the mind, we do actions. These actions or karma that we do can be physical, verbal or mental. These actions leave traces of energy which we call 'karmic seeds' or 'karmic imprints'. When we do different actions, these actions will cease but their seeds or imprints are left on our minds. When other conditions come in our life, these seeds will ripen and bring about what we experience.

So when we act out of ignorance, anger and clinging attachment, we plant negative karmic seeds in our mind stream. These will bring about unhappiness, misery and difficulties in our lives when the right conditions come together.

Do you see how the problems come about in two ways? One is through the creation of karma and the other is through how we interpret something that is happening.

So our mind can create happiness in two ways. One is when we have realistic attitudes and emotions that are beneficial, then our mind is happy right now. The other way is we create positive actions or positive karma and when that karma ripens, it brings the results of happiness.

Our mind is the creator, therefore the path we practice is the path of transforming our own mind

That is why in Buddhism, we say that our mind is the creator. And that's why the path that we practice is the path of transforming our own mind.

The Buddha emphasized that we are responsible for our own actions. We don't blame an external being like a devil or a demon for our own negative mind states. We don't pray to some external being to fix us because we have to be responsible and transform our own mind.

To me, this is really the beauty of the Buddha's teachings, because if all of our happiness and suffering depend on other beings, whether sentient beings or a creator God, then we're stuck, because whatever we experience depends on somebody else whom we don't have any control over.

When the Buddha looked at our happiness and suffering, he said actually we're the ones who are responsible for it. Since we're responsible, it means we have control and we have some choice. We can create the causes of happiness and we can abandon the causes of suffering. So we have a choice. It's our responsibility.

We cannot blame others for our misery

It's kind of a double-edged sword here because when we have a lot of power to influence what we become, it also means that we have responsibility. If we have responsibility, then we can't blame anybody else for our misery.

Sometimes we like blaming other people for our misery, don't we? It can be somehow comforting, "Oh, I have so many problems because all these other people did nasty things. They're so obnoxious." "Why am I unhappy? Because this person is rude and that one is stubborn. And that one doesn't appreciate me." "I'm such a wonderful, fantastic person and I work hard. I'm so good. But nobody appreciates me enough!"

Don't you feel that way? Come on, you can admit it; we're all in the same boat. We feel like, "I'm such a nice person but my family doesn't love me enough. They don't appreciate me enough." "I work so hard at work but all my boss does is criticize me." If I'm a student, then "I study so hard but all my parents and teachers say is, 'You don't try hard enough!' Nobody appreciates me!"

So we start feeling very sorry for ourselves. Or, if we don't feel sorry for ourselves, we get angry at all these other people who don't realize how wonderful we are. You can see that this whole attitude of thinking that our happiness and our suffering come from outside puts us in a difficult position, because we make ourselves into victims: "I'm a victim because my happiness and suffering depend on somebody else whom I can't control." So then I can get mad at the other person. But of course that doesn't mean anything except make the other person mad at me in return. Or I can sit here and sniff and whine and moan and feel sorry for myself, but that doesn't do anything good either.

So you see, this whole strategy of thinking that happiness and suffering comes from outside doesn't work. When we adopt that view, we are putting ourselves into a prison. The prison is our wrong view, thinking that somebody else creates our happiness and suffering. The beauty of the Buddhist teachings is that the Buddha said, "No, we're the ones that create the suffering, so we're responsible. We have to change." The good news is also that we can change.

The 4 Seals – how understanding each of these affects our lives

When the Buddha taught, there are some principles that he accentuated in his teachings, and I just want to review those right now. These are called the four seals – the four seals that make a teaching Buddhist. All the Buddhist traditions share these four teachings.

1. All composite phenomena are transient

The first one is that all composite phenomena are transient. This means that anything that is made, composed or constructed, i.e. arises due to causes and conditions, is impermanent. It's transient; it doesn't last long. You may have heard of the three characteristics. This is one of them: all composite phenomena are transient.

What does it mean in our life to say that everything is impermanent? What it means is that things rise and cease in every moment. They come into existence and cease, come into existence and cease. Since everything is changing all the time, it doesn't make any sense to hold on to anything and cling on to anything as if it were permanent.

One reason why we have so many problems in our life is we don't understand this. Or should I say we understand it only in our head; we don't really live as if things are impermanent. We live as if things are permanent. For example, we think our lives are permanent, but in fact our lives aren't, are they? They're changing. They're transient. We're in the process of aging all the time and going towards death.

The things we own are also impermanent. We may cling on to them as mine, but our clinging doesn't make sense because they're changing all the time. They're decaying. Any new thing that we get is already in the process of decaying. So there is no sense attaching to stuff. When we don't attach to things, we actually have a lot more happiness in our lives.

When people first encounter Buddhism and hear about the disadvantages of attachment, they think that it's so sad. Or they hear about things being impermanent and think that Buddhism is so pessimistic: "Oh! We are all going to die. We're all going to separate from what we like, we're all getting old...Buddhism is so pessimistic!"

People misunderstand. Actually it's not pessimistic. It's being realistic, isn't it? From the time we're conceived in our mother's womb, we're aging and going towards death. That's a reality. It is also a reality that whatever we have is going to fade away. It's not going to always be ours. But that's not being pessimistic because if we let go of the attachment to all these things, then we can enjoy things when we have them and we don't feel any kind of loss or pain of separation when we are separated from them. Wouldn't that be nice?

Think about it. Wouldn't it be nice to be able to love people and yet not go completely crazy with grief when they die?

Or wouldn't it be nice if you can enjoy something beautiful while you have it and when it breaks, you don't cry and moan? Or if you are separated from it, you are able to accept the separation? Wouldn't that be nice?

The fact that things are impermanent doesn't mean that you can't enjoy them. Actually it enables us to enjoy things more because we're free of the mind that clings to them. When we cling, we can't really enjoy.

Let me give you an example. Let's say there's a noodle dish that tastes very good. If you're attached to it, then when you're eating it, the mind is saying, "Oh, this is so good!" You eat very quickly so that you can go get more before somebody else does. When you eat so fast, are you tasting the food? No. Are you enjoying the food? No. Is there any pleasure in that? No! There's no pleasure. We're not enjoying the food. The attachment prevents us from enjoying it, because we're just clinging to it. We're trying to get more but we're not appreciating what we have.

When we don't have attachment to the food, we eat the food slowly and really enjoy it. We really taste the food. And when it's finished, we're okay. We don't go, "Oh! I want more!" We just say, "Oh, that was nice!" and it's over and fine. We're peaceful. So you see, we actually enjoy life more when we don't have the attachment. The attachment prevents the enjoyment.

It is the same in a relationship. If you are very attached to somebody, you may think that you're enjoying that person. But actually the attachment creates many problems in your relationship.

Let's say you meet Prince Charming or Princess Charming. Prince Charming finally comes in his white horse – the guy who is just wonderful, whom you are going to marry and live happily ever after.

When you get attached to him, what happens? You develop all sorts of unrealistic expectations. You know how it is when you first fall in love with somebody. They're so wonderful, aren't they? Don't you think so? When you first fall in love, this person doesn't have one single fault. They're just marvelous.

But what happens after a while? Are they still as marvelous after two years? After five years? Well, you begin to notice some things. Prince Charming sometimes is in a bad mood. He is grumpy in the morning. He doesn't say 'thank you' when you do things for him. All of a sudden, we're noticing that this person that we're so attached to has faults. And we're so let down. Oh!

What creates all this up and down in the relationships? You know how it is, all the songs you hear in the radio: "I love you, I can't live without you..." And then the next song is, "Oh, you betrayed my trust and you left me. I'm miserable..." Experiencing these extremes, going up and down. Lama Yeshe used to say that we have yo-yo minds.

What causes these problems in our relationships? Well, a lot of it is attachment, because when we're very attached to somebody, we expect them to be perfect. We expect them to be everything we've always wanted. We expect them to do everything we want them to do when we want them to do it. Is that unrealistic? Yes.

If somebody came to you and said, "You're the most wonderful thing in the world and I love you to death. I expect you to always be what I want you to be." What would you say? "Hey! Don't project that on me. I'm just a human being. I have faults. Don't expect me to be perfect!" We wouldn't want somebody to be projecting that on us. We want somebody who can accept us.

In the same way, when we project all these wondrous stuff on another person, we're setting the stage to have many difficulties in the relationship. The attachment prevents us from having a good relationship with them and appreciating them because we have all these fanciful ideas of what we want them to be.

Let's get back to the first of the four seals: all composite phenomena are impermanent. Realizing this prevents attachment. This makes it much easier for us to appreciate people and to enjoy things.

2. All contaminated phenomena are unsatisfactory by nature

The second of the four seals is that all contaminated phenomena are unsatisfactory by nature. The word 'unsatisfactory' refers to dukka. Sometimes dukka is translated as suffering.

Some people misunderstand and think that the Buddha said everything is suffering. They ask: "How can that be, because I do experience happiness at times?"

Well, it's true we have happiness at times, but the kind of happiness we are referring to doesn't last forever, so it's unsatisfactory. There's another kind of happiness that comes through internal transformation that can provide a constant state of mind. Happiness that is contaminated by ignorance, anger and attachment is unsatisfactory because it is not going to last.

So that is the second of the four seals, that all contaminated phenomena, all phenomena under the influence of or created by ignorance, are unsatisfactory. They're not going to bring us lasting bliss.

3. All phenomena are empty and selfless

The third of the four seals is that all phenomena are empty and selfless. This means that things do not have an inherent nature or something in them that makes them what they are.

When we look at this pair of eye glasses, it looks like there's something in here that makes these eye glasses. Or there's something in here that makes this a microphone. But actually, if we take the glasses apart, we will find the frame, the lenses, and so on, but we will not be able to find the thing that is glasses. If we take the microphone apart, we will find the stand, the little piece in here, the battery, and so on, but we will not find anything that is the microphone. This is what is meant by saying that all these phenomena are selfless and empty. They don't have an inherent nature.

What this means in terms of our own spiritual practice, is that because we do not have some kind of an inherently existent personality, therefore we can change. We're not inherently evil people even if we make mistakes. We make a mistake but that doesn't mean we're bad people. There's no inherently existent bad person in there.

There's no inherently existent 'me' that I have to worry about and be concerned about all the time. Here, we are relating the fact that all phenomena are empty or selfless to the self or 'I'.

It pertains to everything else we see around us too. A thing does not have its own nature. It arises dependently instead. It exists in an inter-related fashion, in dependence on other things. It exists in dependence on causes and conditions, in dependence on parts, in dependence on our mind that conceives and labels it.

4. Nirvana is true peace

The fourth of the four seals is that nirvana is true peace. What do we mean by nirvana? There's a lot of confusion about this. Sometimes people think nirvana is a place. Actually, somebody found out that there is a little town in Michigan, U.S. that's called 'Nirvana'. You can get directions on how to drive to 'Nirvana'. But that 'Nirvana' is not going to bring you true peace.

The nirvana that the Buddha talked about is a state of mind. It is a quality of mind. It is the quality of the mind being freed from ignorance, anger and clinging attachment. It's the separation from these afflictive emotions that is nirvana. It's the separation or the having ceased of the wrong conceptions that is nirvana. Nirvana is the absence of suffering and its causes. And that's true freedom.

There is so much talk in the world about freedom. We all want to be free. But what does freedom mean? Does freedom mean we're free to buy anything we want? Or does it mean we are free to do anything we want? Sometimes what we buy is not very smart. Sometimes what we do is not very smart. Just having the physical freedom to do things – that's nice but it's not real freedom, because as long as our mind is under the influence of ignorance, anger and clinging attachment, we're not free.

Think about it. Have you ever been in a totally beautiful place and being very unhappy? Has that ever happened to you? You go on vacation to some beautiful place but you're totally miserable? I think most of us have had that experience.

We're in a beautiful place, but the mind is miserable. Why? Because the mind is not free. Ignorance, anger and attachment make our mind unhappy. They make our mind unfree.

It is nice to have external freedom but that is not the ultimate freedom that's going to bring peace to our hearts. The kind of freedom that we want is the freedom from the disturbing attitudes and the afflictive emotions. That's real freedom because when we have that freedom, our mind is happy no matter where we are at or who we are with.

Think about that. If you're really free – there is no ignorance, anger and attachment – then even if you are in an ugly place, your mind is peaceful and content. It means that somebody can be talking about you behind your back or criticizing you to your face, and you're completely okay. You're not bumped out about it. You're not in a bad mood. Wouldn't that be nice?

Wouldn't one of the greatest things in your life be to never get angry again, not because you're stuffing your anger down, but simply because there was nothing in your mind that created any dissatisfaction or hostility? Wouldn't that be wonderful? Think about it. People could say anything in the world to you and you don't get angry. Wouldn't that be nice? You could have anybody for a boss and you'd be happy. It's so nice!

Or think about it. If your mind were free of attachment, then instead of always being dissatisfied: "I want more! I want better!" you are completely satisfied with whatever you have. Total contentment. Wouldn't that be nice? You wouldn't have this compulsion of: "I

have to go earn more money. I have to go get this. I have to do that to be happy.” But instead, whatever your situation was, there is complete contentment. I think it would be great.

So this is what nirvana means. It’s not a place that we go to. It’s a state of mind. It is a state of mind that comes about by eliminating the defilements. In actuality we define nirvana as the emptiness of inherent existence of the mind that is free from the afflictions. That is real peace. That emptiness of the mind that is free of affliction is total peace. And it can never be removed. It can never disappear because it is an unconditioned phenomena.

The nirvana of a Buddha

When the Buddha talked about the unborn, the undying, and going beyond death, this is what he meant: the state of mind of nirvana. It isn’t a conditioned phenomena. That is what we are aiming for. That is what this text is teaching us. In particular, Shantideva is not just teaching us about the cessations of our own misery and attaining our own nirvana, but also how to attain the nirvana of a Buddha.

The nirvana of a Buddha is attained through the motivation of compassion and bodhicitta. ‘Bodhicitta’ can also be translated as the spirit of awakening or the altruistic intention. It is this kind of nirvana – the Buddha’s nirvana that has this love and compassion as well as the cessation of suffering – that we are aiming for. This is what Shantideva is going to teach us in this text.

Questions and Answers

[Audience:] Could you explain the benefits of offering light?

[Ven. Chodron:] Offering light is a practice that has been done in all the Buddhist traditions. I think it must have started from the time of the Buddha himself.

Why do we offer light? In particular, we offer light because light is beautiful and light symbolizes wisdom. It’s like lighting up your mind, so when you make light offerings, you’re also creating the cause to generate wisdom.

We make offerings to the Buddhas and bodhisattvas in order to create positive potential, sometimes translated as merit, but I don’t think ‘merit’ is a very good translation. It’s more that we’re trying to create positive potential or positive energy that nourishes our mind. Whenever we make any kind of offering to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, we create this kind of positive potential. And when we offer light in particular, we’re helping to create the cause to generate wisdom and in particular, Manjushri’s wisdom, because Manjushri is the Buddha of wisdom.

[Audience:] We’re curious about Buddhism in the West and what are the problems or difficulties that you face in propagating Dharma in the West compared to in the East?

[Ven. Chodron:] It’s very interesting to teach Buddhism in different countries because people of different countries have different mentalities and think about different things.

In Singapore, many people have grown up with Buddhism. You’ve learnt about it as children. You have at least seen some of the things, so there’s some receptivity from the time that you’re a child.

In the West, people don’t grow up with that by and large, so they have to start from the very beginning. They often have to overcome many wrong conceptions in the process.

For example, here in Singapore, you may have heard about rebirth from the time you were a child. Maybe you do not understand it fully, but you've heard about it. In the West, people by and large haven't heard about it, so when you teach them, you have to start over from the beginning and explain all of it and they have to think very deeply about all those things.

Of course here too in Singapore, you need to explain what rebirth is and how it operates so that people understand it properly.

There're also other differences. For example in Singapore – I noticed this when I came a couple of days ago and was out taking a walk – people would greet me on the street. In the West, people don't know that I'm a nun. They are starting to know the robes now. But in the beginning, people don't know what the robes are. They don't know who you are.

In Singapore, when you see somebody with a shaved head and dressed like this, you know they're ordained. Well, when I was at the airport waiting for the flight to come to Singapore, one woman came up to me. She saw me as she was passing by, and she turned and came back to me. She sat down beside me and she said: "Oh, dear, are you going through chemo right now?" [laughter]

I said: "No."

She said: "Oh, because I just wanted to tell you in case you're worrying, that your hair will come back. You will feel better and I just wanted to give you some support."

I said: "Oh it's very kind of you to think of me. But I'm okay right now."

[laughter] This kind of thing happens in the West.

[Audience:] Do you believe that there is a bigger force called 'creator' which actually governs our experience as human beings?

[Ven. Chodron:] No.

[Audience:] If we're creators and we create karma, that is our destiny and we have very little control and very little choice. What do we have control over in our life?

[Ven. Chodron:] The reason that I don't believe that there's a greater force that governs our life, is because it doesn't make any sense. If there were a creator that created us, then you have to ask who created the creator? If you say nobody created the creator, then the creator must be permanent. If the creator is permanent, it can't change, which means it can't create. There're many logical fallacies if you posit some kind of initial creator in the universe. If something else created the creator, then it's no longer a creator. If the creator is not created by something else, then it's permanent so it can't create.

You also get into questions like if there is an external creator, why didn't they do a better job? [Audience laughing.] I'm serious. I remember being taught as a little kid that there was a creator and that we are created. So I asked: "Well, why did the creator create war? Why did they create illness? Why did they create death?" Nobody could give me a good answer. They said that the creator created these so that we can learn. And I replied as a little kid: "Well then why didn't the creator create us smarter to start with? Why do we have to suffer to learn? That makes absolutely no sense at all!"

From the Buddhist viewpoint, we don't posit some kind of a greater creator that governs

our life at all. Now, when we talk about karma, karma means that things are conditioned. We create causes and causes produce effects. Karma does not mean that things are predestined. REPEAT: Karma does not mean that things are predestined. There is still choice. As His Holiness the Dalai Lama says, we never know the future until it happens.

If things were predestined, there could be no cause and effect. When there is cause and effect, there is dependency. That there is dependency means when you change one cause or one condition, the whole situation changes. If there's predestination, then nothing can change, so nothing can have causes and conditions.

[Audience:] How do we deal with depression and the negative mind?

[Ven. Chodron:] When we're depressed, we allow our mind to get stuck in a cycle of just thinking quite negative thoughts, and we just spiral down, down, down. I think depression is a very unrealistic state of mind, because there're so many good things going on in our life but depression prevents us from seeing them.

It is like you have a whole wall that is yellow and there is one purple dot on it, and you focus on the purple dot and say that the wall is dirty. But there is this whole wall that's yellow and beautiful.

Similarly, what often happens in our mind is there are many things that are quite beautiful in our lives, that are going well, but we don't notice them. We pick out a couple of things that aren't going well instead, and we make such a big fuss about them. I think one of the important teachings in Buddhism is to appreciate the good things in our life.

First of all, we woke up this morning. That is good, isn't it? The day started off well. We have food to eat. We are incredibly fortunate to have food, aren't we? There are so many beings we share this planet with who are hungry today. What kind of good fortune did we create to be able to have food?!

We all have friends, don't we? You might say, "I'm depressed. Nobody loves me!" I did that a lot when I was younger. Actually many people loved me, but I couldn't see it. I was completely blind. I wanted people to love me in one way. I had my own criteria for how people should love me, "If you love me, you should do this. You should do that. You're not allowed to love me in the way that you want to love me. You have to love me by meeting all my criteria."

I made myself totally miserable and felt unloved and depressed. Then I began to realize that it was my own mind doing this and I said, "Look. Actually there're many people who care about me. And they all care about me in a way that makes sense to them. That is good and I have to open my eyes and appreciate the different ways in which they care about me." When I began to do that and appreciate the good things going on in my life, then there was no depression anymore.

When we think of the things that we know and the education and the talents we have, we see that so many people have helped us in our lives. So many people have done good things to us. We have to see this and appreciate it. When we train our mind to see the good things in our life, then we wake up every morning and just see goodness.

This is especially true with regard to the news, because the news is often about killing, murder and all these stuff. This is totally unrealistic, because if you look, how many people got hurt in Singapore today? Not so many. How many people received benefit from other people today? Everybody.

True or not true? Were you helped by at least one person today? I think so. If we look in

our lives, people are helping us all the time. But the media paints a very pessimistic picture by reporting mostly the bad stuff. But when we open our eyes, there's so much goodness around us. We have to train our mind to see that goodness in others and recognize that we're the recipient of so much goodness.

Dedication of positive potential

I want to lead you in a little meditation and dedication.

First of all, let's rejoice that we were able to come together this evening. Just think about that. How wonderful it was that we were all able to come here and share the Dharma together. Isn't that incredible fortune?

How wonderful it was that we all created so much positive potential or merit. We all created so much good energy by listening to and thinking about the Dharma together tonight.

And then let's take all that positive potential, all of that good energy and send it out into the universe. You could imagine it as a beam of light emanating from your heart and going in all directions. We are sharing all of our positive potential with all the other beings throughout infinite space. So shine that light of your own goodness, your own positive potential out to all the other living beings.

And let's send that light out together with our prayers and aspirations that everybody live peacefully in their own hearts and that everybody can live peacefully with one another as well.

And let's dedicate so that all people who are ill can purify the karmic causes and be released from whatever suffering they are experiencing.

Let's dedicate so that everybody can actualize and cultivate and magnify all of the wonderful good potential, their good seeds, their good qualities.

Let's dedicate so that the Buddha's teachings exist purely in our minds and in our hearts and in the world forever.

Finally, let's dedicate so that all living beings can attain the state of complete, full Buddhahood.