

**Commentary on
Shantideva's "A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life"
Chapter 1: The Benefit of the Spirit of Awakening (Bodhicitta) - Part 2 of 4
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18 Apr 2006**

Cultivating a positive motivation for listening to teachings

Let's cultivate our motivation and begin by remembering the preciousness of this opportunity to listen to the Buddha's teachings. Whoever we were in the previous life created a lot of positive karma so that we have the opportunity now in this life to meet the Dharma, to hear it and to practice it.

We don't want to waste this opportunity. We want to use it wisely. The best way to do that is to cultivate the bodhicitta or the altruistic intention to become a fully enlightened Buddha for the benefit of ourselves and all others.

Even if it seems like we are still a long way from accomplishing full enlightenment, it is still worthwhile to cultivate the motivation and put our energy in the direction of full enlightenment. Contemplate that for a minute.

Then open your eyes and come out of your meditation.

The Buddhist Worldview – Cont'd

How do we know if liberation and full enlightenment exist?

When we cultivate the bodhicitta motivation, which is the theme of the first chapter of this book that we're studying now, we're aiming for full enlightenment for the benefit of all beings. Sometimes the question arises in our mind: "How do we know that enlightenment exists?"

Did you ever have that question? We say that we want to aim for full enlightenment, but what in the world is enlightenment? How do we know that it exists?

What is full enlightenment?

Full enlightenment is the state of mind in which we have purified all the disturbing attitudes, all the negative emotions and all the subtle stains on the mind. So on one hand, enlightenment is having purified everything that there is to purify, and on the other hand, enlightenment is having developed all the good qualities that there are to develop.

Enlightenment has these two qualities – the full abandonment of everything there is to abandon and the full realization of everything there is to realize.

In Tibetan, the word for 'enlightenment' is 'jangchub'. 'Jang' means to purify. 'Chub' has the connotation of 'to increase'. Thus the word 'jangchub' indicates these two qualities of enlightenment, that all the afflictions and stains on the mind have been purified and all the good qualities have been actualized and increased limitlessly. That is what enlightenment is.

Enlightenment is possible because we have the Buddha potential

Now the question comes: "How do I know that I can be enlightened? I mean, I'm just little old me sitting here. I go to work everyday. I come home at night. I get angry. I have attachment. I'm ignorant. Buddha is like way up there in the sky somewhere but I'm just

little old me. So what are you doing talking about me becoming enlightened?" We might have that kind of thought.

In Buddhism, we talk about the Buddha potential, that aspect of our mind that enables us to become a fully enlightened being. On one hand, the ultimate nature of our mind is that it is free from inherent existence. This means the mind has no inherently existent stains on it. On the other hand, our mind has the seeds of all the good qualities that can be developed endlessly. On that basis we say that we can become enlightened.

The analogy of the sky with clouds in it

The analogy is often given of the sky with clouds in it. The sky is very open and pure, unhindered. That is like the ultimate nature of the mind. But then clouds come and obscure the sky and you cannot see the sky. The clouds are like the ignorance, anger and attachment and the selfishness or the self-absorption that contaminate our mind.

The clouds may sometimes cover the sky but they are not part of the sky and can be removed. In the same way the afflictive states of our mind may cover the pure nature of our mind but they are not part of it and can be removed. That is the good news.

A valid basis for self-esteem or self-confidence

Having some sense of our Buddha nature is a very valid basis for self-esteem because that Buddha potential or Buddha nature can never be removed from us. It is part of the nature of mind. There is no way to destroy it. It is always going to be present.

That means that there is always hope. It means that there is always a reason to be confident of ourselves. Even when we make mistakes, even when we mess up, those mistaken actions and the afflictive mental states that cause them are like the clouds that obscure the sky. They can be removed, leaving behind the pure nature of the mind.

If our self-confidence is based on having the Buddha nature, then we will be able to do something very wonderful in our lives. We will always have that sense of hope and confidence. If we base our self-confidence on some kind of transient quality, then our self-confidence is going to crumble after a while.

For example, if we base our self-confidence on our youth and health, how long are we going to be young and healthy? It's not going to last our whole life, is it?

If we base our self-confidence on having a good education and knowing a lot, how long are we going to know a lot and have a clear thinking mind? When we get old, we lose our ability to remember things. We lose our ability to think clearly.

If we base our self-confidence on having a good job, are we going to work from now until we are eighty years old? We are not going to have a good job forever.

If we base our self-confidence on things that are transient, that arise and cease, we will not be able to sustain our self-confidence for a long time. But if we have a sense of our Buddha nature, then no matter what we are experiencing – we are confused or our body is sick or we are forgetful because we are old or we just got fired from our job – we still have a basis to be confident in ourselves because we know that the nature of the mind is something pure and that the potential to become a fully enlightened being is always there.

This is something very important to understand because so many people have self-esteem problems now. We usually look to other people to tell us we are good, to tell us we are wonderful. We want to get promotions and certificates. We think that if we get external confirmation that we are good people, then we will like ourselves and be confident in ourselves.

Actually it doesn't work that way. The confidence in ourselves has to come from inside. It has to come from some stable qualities such as the Buddha nature or the Buddha potential.

Since everybody has the Buddha nature, we cannot say that someone is evil and disregard him

Also, when we understand what the Buddha potential is, we will realize that we can never, ever say that any human being is evil. As much as we may dislike somebody, we cannot just sign them off and say: "Oh, that's an evil human being. Throw him out the window! I don't care about him." Why can't we do that? Because they have the Buddha nature. One day they too will become a fully enlightened being.

I think this has a very strong implication for us because it forces us to generate respect for everybody. Whether or not we like somebody, whether or not we agree with their political opinions, whether we think they are a criminal or a wonderful person, no matter how a person acts or what they are, we cannot say that they are evil. We have to have a sense of respect because they have the ability to become a fully enlightened being.

This is important. It stretches us. It challenges us. We have to open our heart to others. I say this because I do prison work. Many people have the idea: "These people are criminals. They are the scum of society. Just throw them away. Lock them up in a prison and throw them away! We don't need this kind of people in society." But you cannot do that because they also have the Buddha nature. We cannot just write them off and throw them away. They may even become enlightened before we do. There is no reason to be arrogant.

In that way we open our heart and we come to understand others. Knowing about Buddha nature gives us a reason to forgive others because we see that there's something positive in them. It has a very profound effect on our life. When we think about it deeply, if we believe that everybody has the Buddha nature, that everybody has some good quality in them, how can we ever get enraged with people? On what basis can our anger be valid? Who are we getting angry at if every person has this pure nature inside? It makes anger seem a little ridiculous, doesn't it?

This is helpful to remember especially when your mind gets judgmental. Our mind can be very judgmental, can't it? Just look at our petty thoughts: "Why does that person walk this way?" "Why do they dress this way?" "What are they doing?" "They part their hair on the wrong side." "Their socks don't match."

We can go on and on. We can find anything and everything about somebody to comment on and criticize them for it. Right? We can spend all day just leaning back thinking negative thoughts about everybody. How everybody is stupid, they don't know very much, they are incompetent, they are rude, they are inconsiderate, they are this, they are that...

What is the conclusion? Well, if everything is so terrible about them, I must be the best one in the world because I am the only one left! [laughter] That way of thinking does not make us very happy, does it? When we sit there and think negative thoughts about people, we are actually not very happy. On the other hand, when we are able to see their Buddha nature and let go of these negative thoughts, then our mind becomes happy and we can see people's potential. When we see their potential, we can also forgive them when they make mistakes.

Similarly when we make mistakes, we can also forgive ourselves because we know that we have the Buddha potential.

There is no irreparable gap between the Buddha and us

In Buddhism, unlike in other religions, there is not an irreparable gap between who we are and the goal of Buddhahood. In theistic religions, there is a gap between human beings and the divine being – God or the Creator or whatever you call that being.

In Buddhism, there is no irreparable gap like that. It is, rather, a continuum. In other words, because we have the Buddha potential, we can purify our mind and develop our good qualities and become a Buddha. There are many Buddhas and one day we will join the Buddha club and be one.

Why liberation and enlightenment is possible

When His Holiness the Dalai Lama talks about why liberation is possible or when he talks about the Buddha potential, he talks about two specific facts.

The mind is the nature of clear light

First is that the mind is the nature of clear light. That means that the basic nature, the basic entity of the mind is able to cognize objects. Remember I was talking about that yesterday and I defined mind as clear and knowing? The mind has this knowing nature. It is luminous and it is aware. Because of that, it has the ability to perceive everything. It has some kind of purity in it. That the nature of the mind is clear light explains why liberation is possible, because we have the potential to cognize all objects without obscurations. Right now our mind is obscured.

The obscurations are adventitious

That leads to the other reason why liberation is possible, which is that these obscurations are adventitious. In other words, they are temporary. They are not the nature of the mind.

Yesterday I talked about ignorance, anger and attachment – the three poisonous attitudes. Those are the three principal obscurations that prevent our mind from being liberated from cyclic existence. Those three are based on a wrong concept. They are based on a very shaky principle. They are unstable because ignorance perceives things as inherently existent, as having an independent nature. But when we analyze, when we explore, when we meditate, we realize that nothing has an independent nature. Everything is dependent.

If ignorance grasps at things as being independent but their actual nature is dependent, then ignorance is faulty. When our wisdom sees things as they are and sees things as dependent, it has the force or the ability to counteract the ignorance because the ignorance misapprehends things. As the wisdom increases and as we are able to hold it in our mind longer and longer, the ignorance is gradually eradicated because it has a faulty base. Then one day the ignorance can be completely eliminated.

When the ignorance is eliminated, then the attachment and the anger have no root. If you pull out a tree or a poisonous plant by the root, the branches cannot grow. Similarly if we extract the ignorance from the mind, then resentment, laziness and the other afflictions cannot arise. They fade away from the mind. What is left is the clear and knowing nature of the mind. Thus we can attain liberation and become fully enlightened beings.

This is important to understand. If you remember, I was talking yesterday about why it is necessary to understand the Buddhist worldview first. This is an important element of it. Like I said before, it has very deep ramifications for our own self-esteem and for our ability to respect all other living beings.

What's wrong with being in cyclic existence?

When our mind is obscured by defilements, we are in a state of cyclic existence or samsara. It's called 'cyclic existence' because we cycle from one life to another life. We get born and die, get born and die, again and again. Why? This is due to the force of the ignorance,

anger and attachment and the karma or actions that we do motivated by them. As ordinary limited beings, we are under the influence of these afflictive states of mind and the karma that they create. That is what makes us take rebirth again and again.

We may say: “Why would I want to stop taking rebirth? I mean life is kind of good.”

Well, if we think about it, maybe at this very moment we are not experiencing any extreme pain. But the potential to experience pain is right here in our body right now, isn't it? Anybody who has a body that has never been painful? Our body by its very nature gets sick. It can be injured. It can be painful. It gets old. It dies. Even though we might be okay now, the potential for very severe suffering is there. Eventually it's going to come. The only way to avoid sickness and old age is to die first. But that is not a very good alternative, is it? Nobody wants that.

The solution to the whole thing is actually not to take rebirth to start with, because if we do not take rebirth in this kind of flesh and blood body that gets old and sick and dies, then we will not have all the other problems that come along with life.

You are going to say: “Who am I going to be if I don't have a body? If I'm not born here, what am I going to do?”

That question often comes because we have a very limited mind. We are not aware of our Buddha nature. We are not aware of our potential. If we see that we have this clear light nature of the mind and that our mind is empty of inherent existence, we will see that if we generate the wisdom that knows things as they are and we eliminate the ignorance, attachment and anger, then – my goodness – what kind of relief we will experience! What kind of bliss we will experience!

Remember yesterday I was asking you to contemplate how would it feel if you never got angry again no matter how others treated you? Wouldn't that be wonderful? Wouldn't it feel great to know that you could go anywhere, you could be with anybody in the whole wide world, they could say anything to you, even the most cruel, horrible, insulting things and you are not going to get angry? Wouldn't that be great?

You can see that if you are able to eliminate the ignorance, attachment and anger, there is the possibility for real happiness. Don't think that if you stop birth, aging, sickness and death, nothing is going to happen and life is going to be very boring. Actually you are going to be much happier and feel very blissful.

Arhatship or liberation

If we eliminate the ignorance, attachment and anger and the karma that causes rebirth, then we attain a state that is called arhatship or liberation. We can stay in meditation on emptiness or on reality for as long as we want. We have a very subtle body called the mental body and we can stay in that meditation very blissfully. That is one level of spiritual realization.

Full enlightenment

This text by Shantideva is talking about a higher level of spiritual realization – the full enlightenment of a Buddha. In that case, like I said before, we have eliminated everything to be eliminated – all the afflictions and defilements – and we have actualized all the good qualities and developed them limitlessly. Because our compassion is so great, we can voluntarily manifest in this world to benefit others. That brings a tremendous amount of joy in the mind too. Our lives become so meaningful because we can be of great benefit to others and lead them to liberation and enlightenment.

What is life after liberation or enlightenment like?

Do not think that when you attain liberation and enlightenment, you become like a bump on a log and disappear. That is not what happens. Actually you become very vibrant and totally fearless because you are not afraid of birth, aging, sickness and death. You have gone beyond them. You are not afraid of not getting what you want. You are not afraid of having problems. You are not afraid of being separated from what you enjoy. You are not afraid of all these because all the causes – the mental afflictions – have been purified from the mind. There is a great deal of bliss and happiness.

And it is a stable kind of happiness. It is not the happiness that comes from having a good friend or the happiness that comes from getting a raise at work. It is not that kind of unstable happiness. It is something that once you attained it, there is never going to be any cause to lose it again. It will always be there.

When we think: “This is the potential of my life. This is what I can actualize and become,” then we have a completely different vision of the meaning and purpose of our life.

No room for depression

When we look at things in a very ordinary way, we think: “What’s the meaning of my life? What can I attain? Well, I can have a good job and make money. I can get married and have kids. I can do some social work.” But at the end of the day, there is always death, isn’t there?

But when we think that we can transcend cyclic existence and imbue our mind with compassion and wisdom to such an extent that we get great bliss from manifesting in this world to help all others, then our life becomes so meaningful and purposeful. It gives us a lot of energy too because we see that we can do something very good with our lives. When we have that sense of being able to do something wonderful in our lives, then there is no chance for depression.

Yesterday somebody asked how to deal with depression in the questions and answers session. Here we see that when we have a good sense of the meaning and purpose of our life, there is no room for depression. Depression comes only when our mind is being very small and narrow and we are just looking at things in a very worldly way. But when we look long term, when we have a great vision, when we have a noble purpose in our life, then where does depression fit in? It doesn’t! There is no space for it.

The bodhisattvas – the great beings who are intent on becoming Buddhas – never get depressed. Wouldn’t that be nice? This is another benefit of aiming for enlightenment – no room for depression ever again.

Renunciation or the determination to be free

To get us going on the path, we need to have the determination to be free from cyclic existence. That is very important. That is the first step because if we do not have the determination to be free from cyclic existence, we will never be free. We see this happening in our life all the time. If we do not have any aspiration, we are never going to do anything. So we need to have the aspiration for liberation and then there is the chance for us to accomplish it.

This aspiration for liberation or the determination to be free is also called renunciation. Now people hear the term ‘renunciation’ and they are put off by the term: “Renunciation sounds terrible!” Actually renunciation is not a very good translation of the Tibetan term. The Tibetan term has the connotation of definitely emerging from suffering.

If you do use the word 'renunciation', you have to be clear what you want to renounce. We are renouncing suffering, misery and dissatisfaction. Don't you want to renounce those? Or do you want to stay in a dissatisfied state forever?

When you hear the term 'renunciation', don't think: "That means I have to give up all the pleasures in life. I have to give up everything that makes me happy." That is not the meaning of renunciation. You are not renouncing happiness; you are renouncing misery.

This sense of renunciation, this determination to be free is a very important part of our spiritual path. Like I said, it is the essential thing that gets us going in the Dharma.

If we do not have renunciation, we will keep blaming others for our problems

If we don't have renunciation, what happens is we will keep blaming others for our problems. When we have renunciation or the determination to be free from cyclic existence, we are accepting responsibility for our own life and what happens to it. We know that we can counteract the defilements. We know that we are the ones who are responsible for our own happiness. So when we have this determination to be free or renunciation, we stop blaming others for our problems. This already gives us a lot of freedom because we are not constantly blaming others for our problems.

We are professionals at blaming others for our problems, aren't we? "Why am I unhappy? Because this person did this and that person did that." "My husband did this!" "My wife did that!" "My kid did this!" "Everybody is just horrible and that's why I am miserable!"

We keep blaming others. What do we get out of blaming others? Does it change anything? You get up in the morning in a bad mood and you are grumpy and you just want to complain, so when you see your family, instead of saying "Good Morning!" you say: "Why did you do this? Why didn't you do that?" Or when you see your children, you become like a drill sergeant in the army giving them orders all the time because you are blaming them for your misery.

What do we get out of that kind of behavior? We just get more unhappy, don't we? Blaming others does not change anything. Even when we criticize them and even when we give them all of our wonderful advice about how they should change, they still will not do it. So it is better to give up blaming others and accept responsibility, then there is an opportunity to actually change our experience.

Without the determination to be free, we are not motivated to practice the Dharma

Without the determination to be free, we will have very little motivation to practice the Dharma because we will be distracted and kept busy trying to improve our life in cyclic existence. As long as we see happiness and misery as coming from outside, we will always be distracted: "Oh, if I can just fold this cloth in another way, then it will be very nice and I'll be happy." "If I can just rearrange this in a nicer way, I'll be happy." We are always distracted because we are trying to make our life in samsara a little bit better. "If only I can get another job." "If only I can get another boyfriend (or girlfriend)." "If only I can live in a different place."

Thinking in that way doesn't make our life happy. It doesn't change anything. What it does is it totally distracts us from actually creating the cause of happiness through practicing the Dharma. Whereas if we have the determination to be free from cyclic existence, we have a lot of motivation to practice. And of course the more we practice, the happier we are going to be.

When we have renunciation, we do not get caught up in the 'dramas' of our daily life

Another advantage of having the determination to be free is that we do not get caught up in all of the dramas of our daily life. We all have our dramas everyday, don't we? Who is the star of our drama? Me!

When I was a little kid, my mother used to call me 'Sarah Bernhard'. For a long time I did not know who Sarah Bernhard was. I only found out later that Sarah Bernhard was one of the silent film actresses who was very dramatic about everything and there was always so much feeling involved and everything was a big deal. I think I must have been like that. I know now as an adult, I can be like that. It is as if everything that happens in my life is a big deal. People can be dying in Iraq and people can be starving in Sudan, but those are not important. What is important is my colleague did not say 'Good Morning' to me today. That is the national catastrophe of the day!

We make these insignificant things into huge dramas in our life. Why? Because we don't have the determination to be free from cyclic existence. We are just spinning around all these petty things because we have such a small mind. Our mind is just thinking about *me*. There is a whole big world of sentient beings, but we are just thinking about *me*. Even as one individual, we have an extraordinary lifespan that includes previous lives and future lives. Who we are spans multiple lifetimes. But when we are in our Sarah Bernhard phase, we are just looking at what is happening right now and how terrible it is. We cause ourselves so much misery!

Whereas if we just let go of cyclic existence and aspire for liberation, we will not get caught in all these petty dramas.

When we have renunciation, we are very eager to transform our actions

Another benefit that comes from having renunciation or the determination to be free is that then we are very eager to transform everything we do in our life into something that creates the cause for happiness. We want to transform every action into the cause for liberation and enlightenment. When we do that, then every small action we do in our life has incredible potential, because we can transform it into the cause for liberation.

For example, if we aspire to be free from cyclic existence, we want to create as much positive potential or merit as we can. So when it comes time to eat, we stop and offer our food. We do a little meditation before we eat. Then eating becomes the cause for enlightenment.

If we do not think that the goal of our life is liberation and enlightenment, how do we approach food? The same way that animals do. It looks good and we gobble it up quickly. We might eat with chopsticks or a spoon and fork, but the mind is just like an animal's mind sometimes, isn't it? We get our food; we cannot even sit down at a table and eat it; we start eating it while walking back to the table. And we just dive into the food like a hungry dog. We are not using our human potential when we act like that.

When we have the aspiration for liberation, then even small actions like eating can become part of the path to enlightenment. Even bathing your body can become the cause of enlightenment if you change the way you think when you are taking a bath. You think that the water is like wisdom nectar and the dirt and the smell you are washing away is like the negative karma and the distorted mental states. When you think like that when you are bathing, then bathing becomes the cause for liberation.

Washing dishes become the cause for liberation because you can think of the soap and the sponge as the wisdom and compassion that are cleaning the dirt off of your own and other sentient beings' minds. You think like that when you are washing the dishes or when you

are washing your car. Then it becomes the cause for liberation. Then everybody in the family wants to do the dishes because everybody says: "Wow! I can create so much positive potential. I can create the cause for the everlasting happiness of liberation and enlightenment by washing the dishes. Go away mum! Go away dad! I'm going to wash the dishes!"

And so your whole life is transformed through how you approach just small things in your life. So often in our life, we do things just to get them done: "I just want to get that done so that I can go on to something else." But what kind of way is that to live? Think about it.

Is crossing tasks off our to-do lists the purpose of our life?

How many of you make lists of the things you have to do? Many of us, especially now when we have very busy lives, make lists of everything we have to do everyday. Then what does the purpose of our life become? To cross things off of our list. We develop the mind that says: "I just want to get this done and get it off my list. And then I want to get that done and get it off my list! And that, get it off my list!" So then, what is the big pleasure you experience in life? Crossing things off your list. What kind of way is that to live where the biggest pleasure you have in life is crossing a chore off your list? That is no way to live, is it?

When we have the determination to be free from cyclic existence, then we know we can transform all these chores into the cause for enlightenment simply by changing the way we think when we are doing them. Then when we do a chore, we are present. We are living in the here and now when we are doing that chore. We have a good motivation. We are thinking with kindness. We are developing wisdom. We are changing the way we look at the situation. Everything becomes the path to enlightenment and our life becomes very meaningful and very pleasurable and joyful. Our life has much more meaning than just crossing chores off of a list.

So you see, with renunciation, the determination to be free, there is so much goodness that comes.

When there is renunciation, we treasure our precepts

Another benefit from developing renunciation is when we take precepts, for example the five lay precepts or bodhisattva vows or monastic precepts, they become something that we treasure because we see that our precepts help us to give up doing things that we don't really want to do.

If we take the five lay precepts – not to kill or steal or engage in unwise sexual behavior or lie or take intoxicants like alcohol, tobacco, cigarettes and illegal drugs... if you have this determination to be free from cyclic existence because you understand your Buddha nature, then abandoning these five actions is something you want to do. You see your precepts as protection against doing these actions which you don't want to do anyway. So then taking precepts, taking vows, bring so much goodness and so much happiness: "I want to take precepts!"

Whereas if we do not have this determination to be free and because of the confusion in our mind, then our precepts may become confinements: "Oh! I have this precept (to not take intoxicants), so I can't go out and drink. Gee, I wish I didn't have that precept, because I really like to go out and get drunk tonight. Alcohol is the source of happiness!" Right? How many times in our life have we thought that intoxicants are the source of happiness? Many times! But are they? What happens when you go drinking and drugging? Your life is a mess, isn't it? It becomes a total mess! All your relationships become very messy.

I was telling you that I do prison work. The prisoners whom I deal with, almost every

single one of them was intoxicated at the time they committed their crime. I often wonder if they had not been intoxicated, would they have done the action that got them in prison? Because when we get intoxicated, we just lose control and we wind up doing all sorts of incredible things.

When we have the determination to be free from cyclic existence, then the precepts become so valuable and so meaningful and they are not seen as confinements but they are seen as things that make our life very rich and things that we want to live by.

So you see, all these advantages come when we have renunciation of suffering, when we have the determination to be free from ignorance, attachment and anger and all the karma that cause rebirth in cyclic existence. Developing this attitude of wanting to be free of cyclic existence is very important.

Chapter 1: The Benefit of the Spirit of Awakening

I will go into the text now. Yesterday I spoke about Shantideva's biography and the book that we are studying is: A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life.

A bodhisattva is somebody who is intent on becoming a Buddha and who has love and compassion equally for every single living being. Shantideva wrote this guide talking about how bodhisattvas live their lives. We are going to study that so that we can become bodhisattvas and live our lives as they do because their lives are so meaningful.

This book has ten chapters. In this series of talks this year, we are going to go through Chapter One, the idea being that every year hopefully I will be able to come back to Singapore and work on another chapter and then eventually some years down the line, we will finish the whole text. What you are getting now is just Chapter One, then you will have a whole year to practice it before I come back. But I will quiz you on it, so you had better practice.

First line: paying homage

The first line says, "Om Homage to the Buddha." That part was not written by Shantideva. That was written by the translator. The Tibetans wanted to show that all the texts that they have, have a source in Indian Buddhism. They wanted to be able to trace the material back to the Nalanda tradition. Remember I spoke yesterday of Nalanda, the great monastic university in ancient India? The Tibetans really wanted to show that the source of Tibetan Buddhism is the Buddhist tradition in India. So they developed this custom of whenever they translated a book, they would pay homage in a manner according to which of the three baskets of teachings it belongs to.

The Buddha's teachings are called the Tripitaka or the three baskets, meaning the three collections of teachings. The first one is Vinaya or the monastic discipline. The second is the sutra basket. The third is the Abhidharma basket. When they translate a text belonging to the Vinaya basket, to show its authenticity, that it came from India, they pay homage to the Buddha, the omniscient one because the Vinaya texts talk a lot about karma and only the Buddha understands karma and its functions completely.

When it was a sutra text, then homage was paid to the Buddhas and bodhisattvas. When it was an Abhidharma text, homage was paid to Manjushri.

Here it says "Om Homage to the Buddha", but it is not a Vinaya text. It is a sutra text. [Though it says 'Buddha',] it is actually referring to the Buddhas and bodhisattvas because

it is showing us the basic themes of the Mahayana sutras.

Chapter 1 Verse 1

Let us look now at Verse One. This is Shantideva speaking and he says:

“Reverently bowing to the Sugatas: who are endowed with the Dharmakaya, together with their Children and all who are worthy of veneration, I shall concisely present a guide to the discipline of the Children of the Sugatas in accordance with the scriptures.”

Sugatas

This is a verse of homage. Shantideva is paying homage to the Sugatas. ‘Sugatas’ is another term for Buddhas. It is translated as the ‘One Gone to Bliss’ because the Buddha is somebody who has gone to bliss for the reasons that I had described before.

Dharmakaya

Homage is paid to the Sugatas, to the Ones Gone to Bliss who are ‘endowed with the Dharmakaya’. The Dharmakaya refers to the omniscient mind of the Buddha. This omniscient mind has two facets. One facet is the mind that knows all existence. The other facet is the empty nature of that mind. It is the true cessation of that mind.

Remember yesterday I was saying that nirvana is the emptiness of the mind that is free from certain obscurations? One facet of the Dharmakaya is this emptiness of the mind that is free of obscurations. The other facet of the Dharmakaya is the omniscient mind that knows all phenomena.

“The Sugatas are endowed with the Dharmakaya.” That is our goal. That is what we want to become. We want to actualize our Buddha nature.

Children of the Buddha

We are paying homage to them ‘together with their Children and all who are worthy of veneration.’ When we talk about the Children of the Buddha, it does not mean that there is a bunch of little kids in kindergarten running around. The ‘Children of the Buddha’ refers to the bodhisattvas.

Why are bodhisattvas called ‘Children of the Buddha’? In ancient cultures, a child would usually take on the profession of their parents. A child would be seen as somebody who has the potential and training to become like the parents and take on their parents’ profession.

A bodhisattva is like a Child of the Buddha in that a bodhisattva is practicing all the bodhisattva actions and modeling their behavior on the behavior of a fully enlightened Buddha so that one day they can become a fully enlightened Buddha. One day they will take on their parents’ job, so to speak. That is why we are paying homage to the Buddhas and their children because the Buddha’s children or the bodhisattvas will one day become Buddhas and have the same Dharmakaya mind, the same ability to benefit sentient beings.

Making a promise to compose

Then Shantideva says: “I shall concisely present a guide to the discipline of the Children of the Sugatas in accordance with the scriptures.” He is setting out his intention and he is making a promise to compose. As a great bodhisattva himself, when Shantideva makes a promise, he keeps his promise. This verse is his promise to compose this text.

Making effort to complete what we promised to do

When we promise something, it gives us a great deal of energy to be able to complete it especially if we value the promises that we make. I think this is something to look at in our lives. Do we make promises very flippantly and then not carry them through? Do we say: "Yes, I'll do that. I promise you I'll do that," and then at the last minute say: "Oh sorry, I'm busy."

Do we make promises to help people and then we get lazy and make up some excuse? Or do we make a promise like when we take the five precepts to abandon certain actions and then later we kind of rationalize our bad behavior so that we can do what we want to do even though we know it is transgressing a precept?

If Shantideva is making a commitment here to us and making a promise to us, then he is also showing us by his own example that making promises, making commitments is important, and it's important to try and carry through with our promises and commitments.

Sure, sometimes it happens that situations beyond our control happen and we cannot fulfill a promise or a commitment. Then we go and explain to the other person. But we should think carefully before we make promises and commitments and value our word so that others can trust us.

I say this because lately I've seen that many people just say: "Yes, I promise this. I promise that." Then one week later, they are doing something else completely. We should not be like that. We should be like Shantideva. He made this promise and he wrote the whole text.

Questions and answers

[Audience:] You talked about the difference between theistic religions and Buddhism. How would you handle a question such as who created us? In other words, who created the mind and body?

[Ven. Chodron:] Just asking the question that way: "Who created us?", that is presupposing that somebody created us. I do not think that is a proper way to ask the question. When you ask the question that way, you are limiting the answer because you are operating on the assumption that somebody created us. Actually nobody created us. We are the ones who created what we are today through the power of our own thoughts, through the power of our own actions or karma.

So then somebody is going to say: "Who created the universe?" Nobody created the universe. Don't go on the assumption that somebody created the universe.

If you look at science, science is doing research to try and discern the origin of this universe. Science and Buddhism get along quite well. There are many similarities between them. Science is inquiring about the origin of the universe. But then is the origin of this universe the beginning of all existence? I don't think so because this universe had to come from causes. Even if there was a black hole and the big bang, those all had causes.

Everything had a cause that preceded it. You cannot say that there was an initial cause to all existence. Maybe this universe came into existence at one time and it will cease at another time, but there is going to be and there has been many universes. There is no first beginning to all existence. There cannot be because everything that exists depends on causes that come before it.

If somebody says: "There has to be a first beginning to all existence!" then you say: "Good.

Go find it!" Trying to find the first beginning to all existence is like trying to find the end of the number line. Remember the number line in your math class? Zero in the middle and negative numbers on one side (-1, -2, -3, etc) and positive numbers on the other side (+1, +2, etc). Is there an end in either direction to the number line? There is no end.

If somebody says there has to be an end to the number line, what do you say to them? You say: "Well, it's fine. You can think that. But good luck finding it!" It is the same if somebody says: "There has to be an origin to all existence." Well, sure you can believe that. Good luck finding it!

[Audience:] The Buddha talked about heaven and hell. How can we verify that these realms exist?

[Ven. Chodron:] If we look at our own mental state... have you ever been in a hellish mental state? Have you ever been in a state of extreme mental anguish? We've all been through those states. Can you imagine that mental state manifesting in a physical form as a body and the environment that you live in? That is the hell realm. It is just a physical appearance of that mental state.

Have you ever been in a state of incredible pleasure? Lots of sense pleasure coming your way? Take that mental state and imagine that manifesting as a body and an environment and that is the heavenly realm.

Just by looking at your own mind and what it is capable of, we can get an idea of the kind of realms the mind can create.

[Audience:] I was told that we could have many teachers but 1 root guru. How would I recognize my root guru? What feeling will I have?

[Ven. Chodron:] In Buddhism, it is true that we can have many teachers. We usually have one or sometimes two or even three teachers who are the most important ones to us. Sometimes this is the person who first got us going in the Dharma, who first inspired us to follow the path. Sometimes our root teacher is the one whose Dharma teachings have the most profound impact on our mind.

We are the ones who choose our teachers. We are the ones who decide who our root teachers are as well. We do not have to pressure ourselves to try and figure out who it is, but rather just the person who when they teach the Dharma, it just moves us so strongly, more strongly than any other person, that often is the person we call our root guru.

[Audience:] I have problems with my anger. How can I practice everyday in addition to metta meditation?

[Ven. Chodron:] Well, this is a whole other Dharma talk about how to handle anger. So I'm going to take the easy way out and recommend that you get my book 'Working with Anger'. My book was plagiarized from Chapter Six of this book we are studying – Shantideva's "A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life". My book is 100% plagiarized but it has a good source in "A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life". So you might find that helpful if you have difficulty with anger.

[Audience:] My aunt is not in good health and is often sick. My children don't do well in their studies. My career advancement is not smooth. Can I make a prayer request for all three of us? How much does it cost?

[Ven. Chodron:] [laughter] It doesn't cost anything. Yes, you can make prayer requests. Those of us at Sravasti Abbey will be doing prayers at people's request on Vesak day on

May 12th (2006), so you can sign up and we will certainly do prayers for you. We don't charge for anything. This is I think one of the beauty in the Buddha's teachings: everything is done freely, so as monastics, our life is a life of generosity and we just give with what we do. What we hope to do is thereby inspire other people to support our lives and to get in touch with their own internal feeling of generosity and to take delight in being generous.

[Audience:] I am a very devout Buddhist. I feel that there is a spirit attached to my body causing me to have stomach aches and pain in the chest very often. I have tried chanting to get rid of the spirit, but I think it is still in my body. What should I do?

[Ven. Chodron:] What I would recommend is doing metta meditation. Do meditation on loving kindness and direct your loving kindness especially towards the spirit. Instead of having a hateful, spiteful mind towards other beings who harm us, cultivate a compassionate heart and really wish them well. This goes for human beings as well as for any kind of spirits. Generating a heart of love can be very effective.

I remember one time many years ago my mood was kind of depressed, I was moody and not feeling very happy and there wasn't any good reason for it, and I kind of had a feeling: "Oh, maybe there is some kind of external interference, some kind of spirit or something." I don't know if there was or not. I had that thought in my mind. So what I started to do is generate loving kindness for that spirit. I didn't know if there was one or not, but I just said: "Ok, if there is somebody who thinks they are going to be happy by harming me, that person is in a lot of suffering, whether they are a spirit or a human being."

And so I tried to generate loving kindness for them. There is this meditation called the taking and giving meditation where we imagine taking on the suffering of others and giving others our happiness. I did that meditation too. And then the whole bad mood just vanished. The whole thing just disappeared. So I don't know, but it works. So try it.

[Audience:] Am I right to understand that there are two kinds of phenomena: conditioned and unconditioned phenomena?

[Ven. Chodron:] Yes. Conditioned phenomena are those that are produced by causes and conditions so they rise and they cease and they are impermanent. Unconditioned phenomena are things that exist that do not depend on causes and conditions. They are permanent. They do not necessarily last forever, but they are not changing moment by moment.

[Audience:] Conditioned phenomena like body and mind are impermanent and unsatisfactory, whereas unconditioned phenomena like liberation, nirvana and enlightenment are permanent. Is this right?

[Ven. Chodron:] Here we have to clarify some things. Our mind and body are impermanent. And because they are contaminated phenomena – they are contaminated by the force of ignorance and karma – therefore they are by nature suffering. It is not just the fact that they are impermanent. That alone does not make them suffering in nature, because the wisdom of the Buddhas is an impermanent phenomena but it is certainly not suffering in nature; it is not unsatisfactory in nature.

The wisdom of the Buddha arises due to causes. It functions. The wisdom of the Buddha changes moment by moment, but it is eternal. It never ceases.

Just the fact that something is conditioned does not make it unsatisfactory. It is the fact that it is conditioned by ignorance and karma that makes it unsatisfactory in nature. This is related to yesterday's talk when I talked about the four seals.

Liberation is permanent and so is nirvana because they are both the emptiness of inherent existence of a mind that is free of attachment. But enlightenment refers more to a state of being as I understand it. So I'm not sure whether you would say enlightenment is permanent or impermanent because enlightenment has both aspects to it.

The enlightened mind or the omniscient mind of the Buddha is impermanent. It arises due to causes and conditions. Even though it is eternal, it is changing every moment. But the other aspect of the Dharmakaya or the omniscient mind that is the cessation or the nirvana of a Buddha's mind – that aspect is permanent.

[Audience:] Am I right to say that all conditioned and unconditioned phenomena are empty of true existence?

[Ven. Chodron:] Yes.

[Audience:] All phenomena are empty and don't have inherent existence. Therefore they are interdependent and are a result of causes and conditions.

[Ven. Chodron:] Here we have to do some refinement. Yes, all phenomena are empty of true existence and therefore they are interdependent. But not all phenomena depend on causes and conditions because permanent phenomena don't depend on causes and conditions. Only impermanent phenomena do.

[Audience:] Is enlightenment empty too?

[Ven. Chodron:] Yes.

[Audience:] What are the causes and conditions that lead to enlightenment?

[Ven. Chodron:] The causes and conditions are everything we are studying in this book, "A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life". All these bodhisattva practices are the causes that we are creating to actually become a Buddha.

[Audience:] Please explain the word 'unconditioned'.

[Ven. Chodron:] It does mean not being dependent on causes and conditions. Everything is empty and everything is interdependent but it is not necessarily interdependent in the sense of depending on causes and conditions. Permanent phenomena are also interdependent in the sense of having parts and in the sense of existing depending upon the mind that conceives and labels them. We will get into this more when we get to Chapter Nine.

[Audience:] How do we practice impermanence? By daily reflection? Will it just be an understanding and not a realization?

[Ven. Chodron:] How do we practice impermanence? I think it is very important just to remember everyday: "Yes, I'm impermanent. All these conventional things that I see around me that function – they are all impermanent too. They are all arising and ceasing, arising and ceasing. Therefore there is no reason to get attached to anything." Constantly remembering that is a good way to train in impermanence.

Also when we have a problem in our life, when we see that we have gotten attached to something, that we are holding on to something: "I want this! I need this! I have to have it!" then it is very good at that time to look at the thing that we are attached to and ask ourselves if it is impermanent. If it is changing moment by moment, then there is nothing

there worth getting attached to. This kind of reflection can really help us let go of our attachment to things.

It can also help us release our anger because sometimes when we get angry, we think that the person or thing that we are angry at is permanent: "So and so said this. They are an awful person. They are never going to change!" We think they are permanent. If we remember that people arise due to causes and conditions also, then we see that they are going to change. So then we do not always have to be angry at them. We will also see that our own anger can change.

Another way to reflect on anger is to reflect on our own mortality and the fact that we are not going to live forever. When we do that, it helps us set our priorities very clear in life. When we have clear priorities, then our mind is so clear and comfortable. We know what we want to do because it is important. We know what we don't value, what we are going to leave aside so that even when people pressure us to do something, we are not so influenced by that. We do not feel so insecure because we have already thought very well beforehand what our priorities are and we are very clear on them. So meditation on impermanence, especially our own mortality can be very effective in that way.

Meditation and Dedication

Spend a moment coming back to the happiness in our mind because we have been able to hear the Dharma and because we have been able to share the Dharma with so many other people. Think of the happiness that comes from the mind from contemplating our Buddha potential as we did today or from contemplating the determination to be free of cyclic existence.

When we think of our great fortune to have the opportunity to hear these teachings and share them with others, we realize what positive potential we created as individuals and as a group.

Let us take all that positive potential and dedicate it, sending it out into the universe. You can think of it as light rays radiating from your heart going in all directions touching all living beings and freeing their minds from all suffering.

We send out our positive potential together with our prayers and dedication that through our positive actions, may everybody come to see that they have the Buddha nature.

May everybody realize and actualize their Buddha nature, removing all the obscurations.

May all living beings attain full enlightenment. May they all become Sugatas, the Ones Gone to Bliss. May they all have the Dharmakaya mind.

Through our one action tonight of listening to teachings, may all these wonderful results come about forever and for all sentient beings.