

**Commentary on
Shantideva's "A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life"
Chapter 1: The Benefit of the Spirit of Awakening (Bodhicitta) - Part 3 of 4
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Setting a positive motivation before listening to teachings

There are so many types of rebirth in cyclic existence, so many things we could be doing now, so many experiences we could be having, but somehow, as if by a miracle, our good karma enables us to study Shantideva's text this evening.

Having this opportunity is a result of the incredible positive potential we have created in previous lives.

We want to listen to the teachings attentively tonight, take them to heart, put them into practice to pacify our mind and enrich our good qualities, and we want to cultivate the aspiration to do these for the benefit of each and every living being, especially to become fully enlightened so that we can be of the greatest benefit to every sentient being.

Cultivate that motivation for a moment.

Then open your eyes and slowly come out of your meditation.

Sometimes we take our life and the opportunities in our life so much for granted. Have you ever had the experience where you just kind of go: "Wow! This moment, all the things that are happening right now – how precious this moment is!" Do you have that experience very often? The experience of being able to tune into our lives, really live our lives and appreciate what is going on in them.

As I was saying just now when we were cultivating a proper motivation, just having the opportunity to listen to this text depends on so much positive karma created in the past. Karma to get this life, karma to have the situation we are in – these depend on so much coming together in just this very moment. To be able to come and share Shantideva's wonderful text – A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life – this evening together is the result of tremendous positive potential.

This moment is the result of so many wonderful factors in the past coming together. And at the same time, right here and now, we are also creating the causes for so much goodness to come in the future.

That is why we start off a teaching session or a meditation session by deliberately cultivating our motivation, by aspiring for full enlightenment for the benefit of all beings, because that makes this moment the most valuable, wonderful moment that could ever be. It becomes meaningful now and it also creates the cause for so much goodness for ourselves and others in the future.

It is important sometimes to have this perspective on our life so that we appreciate what is happening and what is going on, otherwise we just space out so often and we take our life for granted. We look at what is not going right instead of all the things that are going right.

If we have this view of what is happening now being a product of the past and what we are doing now being the cause for what will become in the future, then we will see that each moment holds so much value, meaning and purpose. When we do that, we are really alive

and we also use our time quite wisely. We do not just fritter it away or space out somewhere.

Chapter 1 Verse 2

Remember in the first verse, Shantideva made the promise to compose the text. Now in this verse and the next one, he is talking about why he is composing the text or how he is going to compose it.

So he says here:

“There is nothing here that has not been said before, nor do I have any skill in composition. Thus, I have no concern for the welfare of others, and I have composed this solely to season my own mind.”

Shantideva is being extremely humble here. He says: “There is nothing here that has not been said before.” He is saying that he is not making up his own teaching. He is not teaching anything new. But what he is doing is, he is taking the Buddha’s teachings and explaining them, amplifying them. He is tying what he says to what Shakyamuni Buddha taught so that we know that what is contained in the text is actually the Buddha’s teachings.

I think that is quite valuable and quite important. Today we have a real spiritual supermarket in the world. You can see that by reading any new age newspaper. There are so many paths and all these new gurus popping up here and popping up there with all kinds of lengthy titles and grand claims. There are those who have made up their path to enlightenment last Wednesday and are marketing it for \$9.99 today.

So we have to be very careful when we are selecting teachers and selecting paths. As spiritual aspirants, we should make ourselves into qualified disciples and look for a qualified path. One of the things we need to do to make ourselves qualified disciples is to use our intelligence. We use our intelligence to evaluate the prospective teachers before we take them as our teacher. In other words, not everybody who teaches is necessarily a qualified teacher. Not everything that is taught is necessarily what the Buddha taught. It is really up to us to scout things out and check up the qualification of the teacher and the teaching.

Here, Shantideva is being extremely humble by saying that he is not saying anything new and the teachings are rooted in the Buddha. We know that we can trust the teachings because they were taught by Shakyamuni Buddha, by a fully enlightened one.

We also see that Shantideva is extremely humble by the line: “Nor do I have any skill in composition.” He is not saying: “Look at me. I am this great author, very skilled, and I have this wonderful path that I realize myself with my own exotic, fantastic wisdom!” He is not saying that, is he? He is saying: “Everything that is in here is not my teaching; it comes from the Buddha. Personally, I have no skill in composition.”

Then Shantideva goes on to say: “Thus I have no concern for the welfare of others”. Actually he does not mean here that he does not have concern for the welfare of others. What he means is that he does not have any preconception that he is a great mentor who will be able to benefit everybody.

Shantideva says: “I have composed this solely to season my own mind.” So he is saying: “I’m composing this text just because it benefits me. It helps me to work on my own mind. I don’t have any special skill. I’m not some great person who is able to benefit many sentient beings.”

Shantideva is showing tremendous humility here. This is quite the opposite of how we act. When we go in for a job interview, what do we do? We say: "Here I am. Here's my resume. I am good in this. I am good in that... And you should hire me because I am wonderful. I will turn your company around!" We just sing our own song, don't we?

So we are quite different. We do not have many qualities but we advertise ourselves very well. In contrast, Shantideva who is a bodhisattva and has tremendous qualities lowers his head and says: "I have no ability to compose and this teaching isn't mine. I'm just writing this basically because I need to review it for myself." He is quite different from us, isn't he?

This kind of humility is a sure sign that somebody is realized. Whenever you meet a teacher who announces their own realizations and sings their own songs, I say: "Be very careful of your pocket book."

In the Buddhist tradition, the Buddha is very clear about it, that it is not permissible to talk about one's own realizations. It is not permissible to advertise oneself: "Here I am – the great and glorious!" Buddhism really emphasizes being very humble and low key. So we all want to look for that kind of quality in a spiritual mentor, not somebody who is proclaiming that they have realized this and that and they can lead you to enlightenment by next month. Be very careful of these kinds of proclamations.

Chapter 1 Verse 3

Shantideva continues in this humble mode in Verse Three. He says:

*"Owing to this, the power of my faith increases to cultivate virtue.
Moreover, if someone else with a disposition like my own examines
this, it may be meaningful."*

Shantideva is saying that he is writing this only to work on his own mind. By writing it in this way, it will help the power of his faith to increase and it will help him to cultivate virtue. So he is saying that by reviewing these teachings, by writing them down, it is something that benefits him. So again, he is showing tremendous humility in saying: "I benefit from reviewing this. I still need to improve myself and I have no expectations of doing anything great for other people."

Again this is different from how we are because when we help somebody, we have great expectations, don't we? Even if we do something small, we expect the other person to notice it. We expect them to take our advice and change. We expect them to appreciate us afterwards. We are often disappointed when others do not behave the way we think they should in response to all of our great, magnificent, benevolent, compassionate help.

That is why we run into problems helping people, because of our attitude of having so many expectations. Whereas Shantideva, he does not have any expectations. He says: "Basically I'm doing this because it increases my faith. It increases my virtue. And if somebody has a disposition similar to mine, then that person may also find this work meaningful." So, really, great humility.

Whether or not we benefit depends on our disposition

When he says that other people may find it meaningful if they have a disposition like his, he is kind of saying to us or challenging us in a way: Hey, do we have a disposition like his? Shantideva has a genuine motivation to become a Buddha to benefit all beings. Do we have that kind of disposition?

According to our disposition, we may or may not benefit from this teaching. The more we share Shantideva's great motivation, the more benefit we will receive from this teaching.

So it is interesting. He is not saying that we will benefit because he is writing a great text. Rather, we will benefit if we have a proper disposition. I think that is an important point because sometimes when we approach the Dharma or approach the teachings, we expect the teacher to do everything for us. We think all we need to do is show up and the rest is our teacher's responsibility.

We think our teacher should be interesting. They should be humorous. They should teach something that is completely easy to understand and yet very profound at the same time, and they should be able to make us understand it without us exerting any effort. Right? Don't you think so?

Well, that kind of thinking on our part explains precisely why we do not learn very much. Because it is really up to us to listen well, to prepare for the teachings. Not just to show up here, but to think all day about: "What am I going to do tonight? How can I prepare my mind and make my mind peaceful and calm and open so that when I go to the teachings, I can take them in and benefit." So it is our job to think about that all day and come here with a certain mental state so that we can really take the teachings in.

Humility and self-confidence

I want to take a moment to talk about humility, considering that it is such a rare quality nowadays when we all like to sing our own praises. We often think, in our confusion, that being humble means we do not have any self-esteem. And we think that somebody who is proud has a lot of self-esteem.

But actually I think it is just the opposite. Why are we arrogant and proud? Because we do not believe in ourselves. Sometimes we may meet somebody who is quite arrogant and we react against them. But just think about it. Why is somebody being arrogant? The basic reason is because they do not believe in themselves. If we believe in ourselves, there is no need to say: "Blah. Blah. Look at me. I'm so wonderful!"

Do you see how having genuine self-confidence goes together with humility, while being arrogant goes together with having low self-esteem? Can you see that? Is that making some sense to you? Think about it a little bit. There is one story I like to tell a lot, because this quality was displayed so clearly to me at that instant.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama's humility

In 1989, His Holiness the Dalai Lama was on a panel of experts at some kind of conference in California that I had the fortune to attend. There was an audience of maybe 1,200 people, quite a big audience. He was there as the expert of this panel of experts. At one point somebody asked a question, and the Dalai Lama thought about it, and then he looked around and he said, "I don't know."

In front of 1,200 people, he said: "I don't know." Would you say that in front of 1,200 people? Would you say it in front of 1 person? When we do not know the answer to a question, we very seldom say: "I don't know." What we do is we try and put down the person who asked the question and make them look stupid. We change the topic. We do anything but admit that we do not know!

Here is the Dalai Lama who is seen as the manifestation of Kuan Yin and he just says: "I don't know." And he is completely okay with it. And then he turned to all the other people on the panel and he said: "What do you think?" He was soliciting their views and their opinions.

This just stuck in my mind so much. Why is it that His Holiness can say “I don’t know” in front of a huge audience and not feel embarrassed, not feel ashamed? He can do that because he has genuine self-confidence. Because he is not buffeted around by attachment to reputation and what other people think about him. Whereas somebody who is insecure will puff themselves up, act very arrogant and make up some answer that has nothing to do with the question just so that they look good.

So we see here that Shantideva is showing through his own behavior a quality of bodhisattvas that is very precious, a quality that we want to emulate.

Chapter 1, Verse 4

We will go on to Verse Four now. Shantideva says:

“This leisure and endowment, which are so difficult to obtain, have been acquired, and they bring about the welfare of the world. If one fails to take this favorable opportunity into consideration, how could this occasion occur again?”

Verse 4 is about the precious human rebirth. This topic comes in the *lamrim* at the very beginning. The *lamrim* is the *Gradual Path to Enlightenment*. In the *lamrim*, it talks about eight leisures and ten endowments. The eight leisures are the eight unfree conditions that we are free from right now that enable us to practice the Dharma. And the ten endowments are the ten conditions which enable us to have a precious human life so that we are able to practice the Dharma.

That is what this verse is about. These conditions which are so difficult to obtain have been acquired and they bring about the welfare of this world.

I remember so clearly that when I began to study the Dharma after I first met the Buddha’s teachings and heard these teachings on the precious human life – all the different freedoms and the different fortunes – I just kind of scratched my head and said: “This is really boring. Why are we talking about this? It doesn’t make any sense. So what if I’m not born as an animal! So what if I’m born in a place where the Buddha’s teachings exist!” I thought: “What a boring meditation!”

It actually took me quite a number of years to appreciate the power of this meditation and what having a precious human life means. Having a precious human life does not just mean being a human being. There are many human beings in this world. A precious human life is a human being who has the conditions to be able to hear the Buddha’s teachings, to think about them and to put them into practice.

If we look around in society, how many people have the opportunity to do that? It is not so easy having the kind of life that we have where we have the opportunity to meet the teachings and where we even have the interest to meet the teachings and where we are able to meet the teachings.

Religious freedom

One of my friends Alex Berzin – he visited Singapore many years ago – traveled in the former Soviet republics before they took the Berlin wall down. He went to teach in Czechoslovakia one time. Because it was a communist country, people were not allowed to be religious. He went there just as a tourist and there was a group of people who were interested in Buddhism and so he agreed to teach them. What they did is they met at somebody’s flat but all of them had to come separately to the flat and they all had to arrive at different times because it couldn’t look like they were having a gathering.

When everybody had arrived, what they did was in a front room, they had a round table and they put out cards – playing cards – and they made it look like they were playing a card game. Then they went into the back room and they had the teachings. They put out the cards to make it look like they had a card game just in case the police came, so that they could very quickly go from the back room where they were having the teachings into the front room, sit around the table, and make it look like they were playing cards, because if the police came and saw them just having a Dharma teaching, they could be in big trouble.

Now imagine living in a country where you didn't have the freedom to practice your own religion, where you have that kind of fear of the police. I mean you are trying to do something virtuous but you are threatened by the police and in danger of being thrown into prison. Very difficult situation!

If you think about it, there are people who live in those kinds of situations right now where they cannot practice the Dharma, where they have to be quite careful and they are very afraid of being found out, because the government outlaws religion. So how fortunate we are to live in a free country where there is freedom of religion and where we can practice our faith. That is tremendous fortune!

"I'm too busy"

But how much do we think about it? How much do we appreciate this opportunity? Don't we take a lot for granted? Singapore is a very rich country, such a peaceful country, but do the citizens appreciate where they live and the opportunity that they have? So many Buddhist teachers coming here. So much going on in terms of the Dharma. And yet do people take advantage of it or is it: "I'm too busy"?

That is a big excuse everybody gives: "I'm too busy." And you can never question anybody when they say: "I'm too busy." You cannot say: "What are you busy doing?" You are just supposed to say: "Oh yes, I believe you."

But what people mean when they say: "I'm too busy," is they mean: "That isn't important to me." Sometimes people say to me: "Oh, it is so important you come to Singapore to teach, but I'm too busy to come."

Oh yeah? I'm supposed to travel all the way from the U.S. to come here and I am not supposed to be too busy to come here, but it is okay if you are too busy to come? Excuse me?

Or people say: "I can't come because it's so far to drive."

Oh, I see. I'm supposed to come half way around the world but you cannot come a half an hour in the car? Hm.

So do we really take advantage of this opportunity or does our mind make up all sorts of excuses? "I have to go here." "I have to go there." "I have to do this and that."

"I have to" vs. "I choose to"

We do not have to do any of those things! All the excuses we make up for why we cannot attend teachings or retreats or why we cannot have a regular daily practice, they are all basically excuses. When we say: "I *have* to go to work." It is not "I *have* to." It is: "I *choose* to go to work."

Or "I *have* to do this and that in the morning." It is not 'have to'. "I *choose* to." Or "I *have* to go to this company gathering in the evening." No, you don't *have* to. You *choose* to.

I think it is very important for us to look at our life and see how much choice we have and get out of this mind that says: "I *have to*", because basically the only thing we ever have to do is die. That is the only 'have to'. Everything else is optional.

Think about it. Isn't everything else optional? The only thing that is certain in our life is that one day we will die. Everything else, there is the choice involved. Whether we take the choice or not, that is up to us. And sometimes we say "I *have to*" in order to avoid acknowledging to ourselves that we are really choosing to do something; we use the excuse of 'I *have to*.'

But I think it is actually much more honest to say "I *choose to*", and then to really look: "Well, what am I choosing to do? How am I choosing to use my time? Am I choosing to use my time to work many hours overtime and neglect my family and be too busy to attend Buddhist teachings? Am I choosing to sleep many more hours than I actually need to sleep instead of to get up and meditate? Am I choosing to watch television in the evening instead of going to bed early so I can get up in the morning and do my meditation practice? What am I really choosing to do?"

I think we have to be quite honest with ourselves and whenever you hear yourself say 'I have to', stop and rephrase it, saying 'I choose to'. And then ask yourself: "Is this what I want to choose to do with my time? I do have a choice here. Is this what I'm choosing to do?"

If we phrase things that way to ourselves, then we are accepting responsibility for our lives and we will start to make wise choices because we realize we have the ability to make those choices.

So even with work which is very important to most people, instead of saying: "I *have to* go to work", rephrase it and say: "I *choose to* go to work". You do not have to go to work, do you? You could choose not to go to work. Of course you get the results of not going to work, but you do have a choice. It is much more honest to think that way and then ask ourselves if what we're doing is something worthwhile, something valuable.

At the time when we die, when we look back on our life, how will we feel about the choices that we are making now? Just the day-to-day, moment-to-moment choices, how would we feel about those at the time we die? And if we think that way, we will become much more mindful and aware and we will make much better choices.

The conditions which are difficult to obtain

Now I want to talk a little here about what the leisures mentioned in Verse Four are. They are usually explained in the *lamrim* as the eight leisures and the ten endowments. I think many of you have heard these before. In the footnote of this book, the translators referred us to a commentary and the commentary referred us to the *Gandavyuhasutra*, which is one part of the *Avamtasaka* sutra. I went to the *Gandavyuhasutra* which is translated into English and I found this section in it called the *Jayosmayatanavimoksa* passage.

The *Gandavyuhasutra* is a wonderful sutra. The main figure in this sutra is a practitioner called Sudana. He wants to learn how to practice the bodhisattva's deeds, so he goes from one teacher to another to learn from them. Each teacher teaches him something and sends him on to another teacher. So he goes to fifty-three teachers altogether.

Jayosmayatanavimoksa is one of the teachers that he goes to. And here in the *Jayosmayatanavimoksa* passage, it talks about the conditions that are difficult to obtain and which provide this precious opportunity that we currently have to practice the Dharma.

I looked up the passage and I copied out these different conditions that I will share with you now.

1. It is difficult to enter the Mahayana.

It is difficult to encounter the Mahayana teachings, these beautiful teachings that show us how to attain full enlightenment. We could have encountered so many other paths, so many other teachings, but we haven't. Instead we encountered the Mahayana teachings of the Fully Awakened One, the Buddha. What great fortune we have that we have received this difficult to receive condition!

2. It is difficult to avoid situations inopportune for enlightenment.

It is very difficult to avoid lower rebirth or it is difficult to avoid having various physical or mental ailments that inhibit us from practicing the Dharma. But we have avoided those conditions. How fortunate we are!

3. It is difficult to be human.

There are so many different kinds of living beings. We could have been born as animals, as hungry ghosts, as devas who experience incredible bliss, but we were not. We have a human life. Very fortunate!

4. It is difficult to remove error and doubt about the right opportunity.

It is difficult to obtain the purity of leisure and endowment and to appreciate the circumstance, the opportunity that we have.

5. It is difficult to find a Buddha in the world.

It is difficult to be born in a time when a Fully Enlightened One has appeared on this earth, has given teachings, and where there is still a lineage of those teachings existing in a live and vibrant way from the time of that Fully Enlightened One down to us. What incredible fortune to be born at this time and in this place where we have the lineage of the Buddha's teachings!

6. It is difficult to have all of our faculties in order.

It would be very easy to have impaired faculties, to perhaps be blind, to be deaf, to be physically handicapped or mentally challenged. But we aren't. All of our sense faculties are intact. We do not have Alzheimer's disease. We are not senile, at least not yet. So how fortunate we are to have our mind alert and our body capable so we can really practice the Dharma.

7. It is difficult to hear the truth.

In other words, it is difficult to hear the Buddha's teachings. Even if we are born in a place where Buddhism exists, it is still difficult to hear the teachings. Even here in Singapore. There are about four million people here. How many people have the fortune to hear the Buddha's teachings? A comparatively small percentage. In the country I come from, the U.S., it is an even smaller percentage.

So how fortunate we are to actually encounter the Buddha Dharma and be able to hear the teachings because without hearing the teachings, how are we going to practice? Yesterday somebody came up to me and ask if it is possible to meditate on your own without having a teacher, and I think that is a bit difficult because we have to learn how to meditate, so we have to have a teacher to learn from and put it into practice. So hearing the Dharma is difficult.

8. It is difficult to meet people of truth.

Encountering good people. In other words, good Dharma friends. People whom we can share the Dharma with. People who will encourage us in the practice. If we look around, how many people around us have really good ethical discipline? When we look at the five

precepts – abandoning killing, stealing, unwise sexual behavior, lying and taking intoxicants – how many people around us, how many people do you know conscientiously abandon those five actions?

Think about it. How many people do you know who do not drink alcohol? This is one of the big things people always say to me: “I *have* to drink” – you know this *have to* business – “When I go out with people in my company, I *have* to drink.”

You *have* to drink? They are pointing a gun at your head and they are going to shoot you if you do not take alcohol? Excuse me?

“No, I *have* to drink.”

Why? “Because they are going to think I’m funny if I don’t drink.”

And this is usually the parent of a child who says to their child: “If your friends are doing things that are not good, don’t fall prey to peer pressure.” But what are the parents doing? They say: “Well, I *have* to because all my friends are doing it.” So the parents are succumbing to peer pressure and at the same time, they are telling their child not to. That is very ‘logical’, very ‘reasonable’, isn’t it?

Parents have to live what they are teaching their kids. You have to do it really for the benefit of the future generation because your kids look at what you do, not what you say. It is very easy to say things. But as parents, if you do not do and live the good values that you are trying to cultivate in your kids, your kids are not going to believe you. So really try and do it for their benefit, if not for your own.

9. It is difficult to find genuine spiritual teachers.

This is really hard. Remember what I was saying? Nowadays we have a spiritual supermarket. So many people just claim themselves to be realized beings. To meet authentic teachers is not that easy. Think about so many countries in the world where they have no access to spiritual teachers. Here you have so many people coming and teaching you – when you have time to attend.

10. It is difficult to receive genuine guidance and instruction.

It is difficult to meet the teachers and receive their instruction. It is also difficult, from our side, to be attracted to the Dharma, to have an interest in the Dharma. So we have to really appreciate that part of ourselves that has a genuine spiritual yearning. Instead of ignoring our spiritual side or covering it up, we need to respect and appreciate that part of ourselves that wants to understand what life is about and yearns for genuine spiritual freedom. It is very important to respect and appreciate that part of ourselves.

11. It is hard to live right in the human world.

It is hard to live with a good livelihood in this world, isn’t it? So many people come to me and ask: “How do you do business and keep the five precepts?”

I ask: “What do you mean?”

They say: “Well, in order to do business, you have to lie.”

And I say – remember this? – “You *have* to lie? Really? You *have* to lie in order to do business?”

No, you do not have to lie. One of my friends used to be an executive in a very prominent Hong Kong company. She told me that your business does much better in the long term if you tell your customers the truth. If you lie to your customers, they are going to find out

and they will stop doing business with you and they will also tell their friends not to do business with you. But if you tell your customers the truth, they will trust you and they will keep coming back because they trust you. So in the long term, being honest in your business actually makes your business prosper because of the trusted relationships that you built up.

So really think about it. How many people have right livelihood in this world? Do we have right livelihood in this world?

12. It is difficult to carry out the truth in all respects.

It is difficult to live the teachings, to embody the teachings in our life. But we have the opportunity to do that, so let us appreciate that freedom and that fortune and try and put the teachings into practice as best as we can.

The beggar who finds a jewel in the garbage

When we look at all these different conditions that were spoken of in the *Gandavyuhasutra* and we check and we see that we have them, that we have all these conditions that are actually difficult to obtain, then we have a sense of great joy. And they say that the joy we feel is like a beggar who finds a jewel in the garbage.

If you look at it, we are kind of like a spiritual beggar, aren't we? We are impoverished spiritually. If we were to find a jewel, the jewel being our precious human life with all these positive circumstances and opportunities to practice, and if we really value the Dharma, then wouldn't we feel like an impoverished person who found a jewel in the rubbish?

I was telling you that when I first learnt about this meditation, I found it irrelevant and boring. That is basically because my mind was irrelevant and boring. It was not because the teachings had any fault, but because my mind was very obscured with rubbish.

Subsequently, I have come to appreciate this meditation. This happens because I appreciate the Dharma. The more I appreciate the Dharma, the more automatically I appreciate having the opportunity to learn it, to practice it, to try and live it in my life. The more I do that, the more in turn I appreciate how incredibly fortunate I am to have this opportunity. Especially when we think of all the different things that we could have been born as, but we weren't born as them – we were born with this precious human life – then we feel so fortunate!

If we feel fortunate for having these things that are difficult to find, then we do not moan and groan if we do not have as much money as we would like to have. Or if we do not have the social life we would like to have. Or if people at work do not appreciate us enough. Or if we are not praised enough. Or if we do not get the promotion. Or if somebody else is richer than us.

When we really appreciate having a precious human life, then all these other little things in our life that used to seem so important and so worrisome, that we want so much, all of a sudden those things seem rather trivial and foolish.

Why would we be so attached to reputation? Reputation does not do anything good for us. If what we really value is the opportunity to practice the Dharma and the opportunity to attain spiritual realizations and enlightenment, how does a good reputation increase that opportunity? Does it? No! Who cares what our reputation is! When you go to study with a qualified spiritual teacher, they do not care what your reputation is. They do not care what level you have achieved in your corporation.

Being attached to those things is not very worthwhile in the long term because in terms of gaining spiritual realizations, having reputation, image and fame does not help at all – not one single iota!

So do you get what I am saying? That when we really appreciate the Dharma and appreciate the precious human life, then some of these other things that we used to fret about, worry about, that our mind would spin round and round about, all of a sudden those things seem so inconsequential!

You didn't get the promotion. Actually that's better because when you get a promotion, you have to work more overtime, don't you? You have more stress which brings more health problems. If you do not get the promotion, you have so much more freedom in your life. Your health is better. You get to attend Dharma teachings. So think about the benefits of not getting the promotion. Really. So many things that we worry about in our life, if we learn to think properly, we will see that some of the things that we worry about are actually incredible fortunes.

Like people say: "I didn't get the bonus I wanted at work!" Or "I should earn more money. I want more money!"

What is money going to do for you? Is money going to get you enlightened? You cannot buy enlightenment. You cannot hire somebody else to practice the Dharma for you. You cannot say: "Look. I'll pay you \$100 and you meditate everyday for me." It does not work that way. Practicing the Dharma is like eating. We have to do it ourselves to get the benefit. We cannot say: "I'm hungry. Please eat dinner for me." We have to do it ourselves. So too we have to practice the Dharma ourselves. Money does not give us that opportunity to do that.

In fact sometimes when we have a whole lot of money, we are more distracted from Dharma practice because it takes a lot of time to manage the money, doesn't it? Because you are so worried. "Do I invest it here? Do I invest it there? What brings me the most interest? How is the stock market doing? And all these relatives I didn't know I had are coming to ask me for loans. Do I give them the money or not?"

So sometimes it can be a huge distraction. If you do not have as much money as you want, say to yourself: "Great! What a wonderful opportunity. I'm not really rich. I can practice the Dharma much better." And really think about this.

I remember one time several years ago, Bill Gates' best friend passed away. I was asked to preside over his memorial service which was held at Bill Gates' house in Seattle. I lived in Seattle at that time. When I came back from doing that memorial service and took a walk in the park near where I lived, it hit me: "Wow! I can walk in this park. Bill Gates can't walk in a park."

Think about it. If you are a very rich person like Bill Gates, you cannot even walk down the street, can you? You are so afraid somebody will kidnap you. Even with his children. His children need bodyguards because somebody might kidnap them and hold them for a ransom because they know that their mum and dad have so much money. Think of how captivated, how limited the lives are of people who are very rich. They cannot walk down the street like we can. They cannot do simple things. They cannot just go to the market and get some rice. Simple things that we take for granted, very rich people cannot do. Very famous people cannot do.

Think about it. The fortune we have of not being too rich. It is a fortune, isn't it? So do not complain about what you have. Be satisfied with it.

Chapter 1 Verse 5

“Just as lightning illuminates the darkness of a cloudy night for an instant, in the same way, by the power of the Buddha, occasionally people’s minds are momentarily inclined toward merit.”

Lightning lasts like this [snap of fingers]. It is here and it is gone. Lightning does not last very long. And it lights up a very cloudy night.

In the same way, due to the inspiration of the Buddha, due to the positive imprints that we have in our mind because of having received the Buddha’s teachings in previous lives, then occasionally, not very often, our minds are momentarily inclined towards virtue.

Think about it. How often are our minds inclined towards virtue? How often are our minds under the influence of ignorance, clinging attachment and anger? So often our minds are just captivated by the disturbing attitudes. We will sit for hours ruminating, won’t we?

How many people here ruminate? I ruminate. When somebody says one small little thing that I do not like, I will start thinking about it: “Why did he say that? What did he really mean? I wonder what’s going on? Did I do something wrong? What does he mean talking to me like this? That shouldn’t happen! I think maybe he has psychological problems! Yes, that’s for sure.”

We psycho-analyze everybody. “This person must be botherline and that’s why they say that comment to me.” We just spin round and round ruminating about what somebody said to us. We can spend quite a long time doing it, can’t we? Thinking of all the possibilities. We spend a lot of time complaining too, don’t we?

How many people complain? We can spend a lot of time complaining, don’t we? We have this precious human life with the ability to develop infinite compassion equally for every single sentient being and what do we do? We spend it complaining because the water from the shower was not the right temperature. We have a precious human life and look how we use our time and energy. Sometimes we are really silly, aren’t we?

When we think about this, it helps us make wise choices so that our virtue is not just like a flash of lightning on a cloudy night. We want to make our virtue to be like the sun, coming up and shining all day long. Or actually a better analogy yet is the sun at the North Pole in summer because then the sun never sets. So may our mind be lit up by virtue like the sky is lit up at the North Pole in summer. Not like a flash of lightning.

But if you think about it, most of the time for us, our minds are preoccupied with very worldly concerns so it is hard to create virtue.

Chapter 1 Verse 6

“Thus, virtue is perpetually ever so feeble, while the power of vice is great and extremely dreadful. If there were no Spirit of Perfect Awakening, what other virtue would overcome it?”

Thus the power of our virtue is feeble. Think about it. For a karma to be complete, four factors are required: the object, the thought to do the action (which includes the motivation), the action itself and the completion of the action. If our motivation is strong then the karma created by that action becomes stronger. If we do an action repeatedly, the karma created by it becomes stronger.

Think about our virtuous actions. How many of us, when we get up in the morning, make offerings to the Buddha? When we make offerings to the Buddha, do we spend some time to think about our motivation and think: "I'm making this offering because I want to attain enlightenment for the benefit of sentient beings"?

I do not know about you but lots of times in the morning I am a little groggy, so it is like, okay, I do my three prostrations, and I take some biscuits or water or tea and I put it on the altar and I go, "Om ah hum; om ah hum; om ah hum". And then "Where's my tea? I want tea to drink!"

So in the morning, there is some virtue but the motivation is not well thought out. The motivation is not strong. I am not doing the action carefully. I am doing it in a hurry because I am much more interested in getting my cup of tea than in offering the Buddha a cup of tea. So virtue is perpetually feeble.

However when we do negative actions we really contemplate our motivation very well. "That person, I don't like him. I'm going to ruin his reputation and get even with him for what he said to me. In the next meeting at work, I'm going to just casually mention all the mistakes he made on the project, and I'm going to do it in a very nice, sweet voice but in front of all the managers so that they will know how awful this person is. And then his reputation in the whole company will be ruined!"

So we plan it out very well. We took a long time cultivating our motivation. We think about our strategy, how we are going to ruin his reputation. We go into the meeting with everybody and we reveal that person's mistakes ever so nicely. We do not cut corners. We do not abbreviate it. We take as much time as is necessary to reveal all of his faults to everybody else. And in the end, we rejoice: "I got him! Good!"

So in contrast to the energy somebody like me puts into making offerings to the Buddha where I'm like half-asleep, when I create negative actions – very strong, perfect, wonderful negative karma! So it is interesting to think about this in our life. When we look at how we act, we see that our virtue is feeble right now but our negativity is great.

That is why Shantideva says: "If there were no Spirit of Perfect Awakening"... 'Spirit of Perfect Awakening' is how the translators are translating 'bodhicitta', the aspiration for full enlightenment for the benefit of all beings. So "If there were no bodhicitta, what other virtue would overcome all these negativities?"

When we see how 'perfect' our negative karma is, then we see that we need some very strong virtuous mind to overcome it. And the bodhicitta is that strong virtuous mind. It is so precious and powerful because when we cultivate the bodhicitta before any action we do, that action becomes incredibly powerful virtue.

Even if all we are doing is offering one apple to the Buddha, if we have that bodhicitta motivation, it is so strong. Why? Because with the bodhicitta, we are working for the enlightenment of every single sentient being. What an incredible, vast motivation! What an incredible noble motivation to work for the enlightenment of every single sentient being! That kind of virtuous mind is unsurpassable. That is why it is important that in whatever we do, we try to cultivate the bodhicitta beforehand.

That is why at the beginning of the teaching tonight and every night, I lead you in a little motivation to cultivate the bodhicitta. It makes the action of sharing the teachings together very powerful.

Homework to do every morning

Every morning when you wake up, if you cultivate bodhicitta, it completely transforms your day. Here is the homework assignment for you. There are three things to do when you wake up in the morning, three things to think about. You do not even have to get out of bed to do this so don't tell me you cannot do it!

When you first get up in the morning, think: "Wow! How wonderful it is that I'm alive! What is important for me to do today? There are three very important things for me to do today:

1. As much as possible, I'm not going to harm anybody with what I say, do or think. As much as possible I'm going to avoid harm.
2. As much as possible, I'm going to be of benefit to others. So in whatever big or small way that presents itself during the day, I'm going to help whoever is in front of me.
3. What else is important today? Today, the most important thing is to hold the bodhicitta motivation as the most precious motivation in our entire life. And so think: 'Everything I do today I want to do motivated by the wish to become a Buddha for the benefit of all beings. I'm going to cherish this bodhicitta motivation more than anything in my life and remember it continuously today.'

So if you think of those three things – not to harm, to benefit and to hold the bodhicitta – every morning when you get up, you make so many activities that you do that day virtuous. By the power of that very strong, noble, wonderful aspiration for the greatest, highest awakening for the benefit of every single sentient being, by the power of the bodhicitta, our human life becomes very meaningful.

All of our parents' effort – giving birth to us, feeding us, educating us, etc – becomes so meaningful if we can cultivate the bodhicitta. Even if our bodhicitta is artificial, even if we do not seal it in our hearts, still to deliberately say the words to ourselves, to imprint our mind with that noble thought makes our life extremely meaningful. It makes every kindness that we have received from every sentient being in our life worth their effort because we are really transforming ourselves for the benefit of all beings.

Questions and Answers

[Audience:] Given that each of us is responsible for our own happiness, what does it mean to say that I will take responsibility to liberate all beings from suffering? How can such an aspiration be fulfilled?

[Ven. Chodron:] When we generate the bodhicitta and the wish to liberate all beings from suffering, we are committing ourselves to doing that. It may take a long time for that to happen. And since sentient beings are countless in number, it may never happen. But still it is worthwhile to accept that responsibility and generate that aspiration.

We say that we are responsible for liberating all sentient beings, but we also say that each person is responsible for liberating themselves. What does that mean?

It means that from our own side we are responsible for purifying our obstacles to benefiting others and for generating all the good qualities that make it easiest for us to benefit them.

Accepting the responsibility does not mean that we can force others to become enlightened. We cannot force people to be enlightened. We cannot drag them to enlightenment. But

from our side, we can eliminate our own handicaps so that we can be of benefit to them and we can teach, guide and inspire them on the path. So that is what it means when we say that we take on the responsibility to liberate them.

There is a saying in English: You can lead a horse to water but you can't make him drink. The horse is responsible for drinking the water. Nobody else can drink for him. But we can lead the horse to the water. If we do not lead the horse to the water, the horse does not have the chance to drink it.

So when we take on the responsibility to liberate others, we are taking on the responsibility to lead them to the teachings and give them the teachings. But then each person must practice themselves just like each horse must drink for itself. Everybody is responsible for putting the teachings into practice themselves.

[Audience:] We all have the Buddha nature but how did we lose our Buddha nature in the first place? If we gain back our Buddha nature through enlightenment, will we lose it again?

There is a little bit of misunderstanding in this question. We never lost our Buddha nature. We have always had our Buddha nature. But our Buddha nature has been covered with the clouds of ignorance, anger and attachment.

The Buddha nature has always been there. It is like the sky is always there, even on a cloudy day. We never lost our Buddha nature, but what we never did is we never clear the clouds of the afflictive mental states from our mind. Once we have cleared those clouds and especially once we realize emptiness with our wisdom and can eradicate the clouds of afflictive mental states from our mind, then we fully actualize our Buddha nature and there is no possibility for us to ever go backwards on the spiritual path. Once we have eliminated ignorance through wisdom, how can we ever become ignorant again? It is impossible because there is no cause for it.

[Audience:] Somebody requested you yesterday to do prayers for their children who are not doing well in school, their mother who is sick and for themselves because they are not doing well in their career. How does making prayers help them?

[Ven. Chodron:] Well, what prayers do is they act as a conducive force. They create a good energy field so that that person's own good karma can ripen. If somebody makes an offering and asks us to do prayers for them and we dedicate for the people who help us, we are sending that good energy to them, and then hopefully they have the good karmic seeds in their own mind that can ripen so that things go better in their life.

Also when we pray and dedicate for people, we are not just praying and dedicating so that the external situations in their life change, but we are also praying and dedicating so that the person's mind may change and so that they may be more content and happy with what they have.

Like we have been discussing together the last few nights, we may have many good things going for us but we cannot see them in our life. Therefore when we pray and dedicate, we are also praying and dedicating for the person who has made the offering and has requested the prayers on others' behalf, so that the person can see that maybe their worry and concern about their family members is misplaced. Maybe things in their family are not as bad as they thought. And if they lighten up, they might better appreciate their family life and what the other members of their family are doing.

[Audience:] Can you explain one more time the difference between full enlightenment and liberation?

The reason I said ‘full enlightenment’ is because sometimes liberation can be called enlightenment. But I am discriminating the full enlightenment of a Buddha from the liberation of an arhat.

The difference is this: there are two kinds of obscurations on our mind. One is called the afflictive obscurations. These are the ignorance, attachment, resentment, laziness, belligerence – the negative emotions and wrong conceptions and the karma that is created under their influence. These afflictive obscurations cause us to be reborn in cyclic existence. When we have removed them, then we become an arhat. We attain liberation.

But there are still very subtle stains on the mind and those subtle stains are called the cognitive obscurations. An example of a cognitive obscuration is the appearance of true existence to the mind. Or the very subtle imprints left over from the ignorance, even though the ignorance has been removed. These very subtle imprints and the appearance of inherent existence are the cognitive obscurations and they prevent us from attaining the full enlightenment of a Buddha where we will have an omniscient mind that fully knows everything that exists and that has the complete capacity to know how perfectly to guide others.

So while arhats or liberated beings have removed the afflictive obscurations, they have not removed the cognitive obscurations so they are not all-knowing like the Buddha. Still an arhat has attained a very high level of realization and we definitely need to respect and honor the people who have attained arhatship because they have certainly done a lot more than the rest of us have done.

But it is also very good if we can aim for full enlightenment right from the beginning. From the beginning, if we can have it in our mind that we really want to benefit all sentient beings, then that is very wonderful. That is what Shantideva is trying to get across to us in this text.

[Audience:] Can prayers be dedicated to those who’ve passed away many years ago?

[Ven. Chodron:] Yes, you can dedicate for people who are deceased. Like I was saying before, when we dedicate, the prayers send good energy to them and that will help their own good karma ripen.

[Audience:] You mentioned that a person is arrogant because he or she is insecure. How do we deal with this person when he or she becomes difficult?

[Ven. Chodron:] You mean how do we change them so they are not arrogant anymore? Is that the question – how do we make them different? Or is the question how do we work with our own mind?

When we are focused on changing the other person, we are going to have many problems. We have to change our own mind. When a person is acting very arrogant, we have to look inside our own mind and ask: “Why does that bother me?” It is a very good exercise to do. When somebody else is doing something that we do not like, ask ourselves: “Why don’t I like it?”

“Well because they are doing this and that...”

“Well, that is true. They are saying all that stuff. But why don’t I like it?”

“Because they’re doing this and that! They’re putting me down! They’re acting arrogant! They’re acting in a way they shouldn’t! They’re not appreciating me!”

“Well, yes. They may be doing all of that, but why does it bother me?”

Do you see what I am getting at? People may be doing all these things, but the real issue is: why am I bothered by it? So this is what we have to ask ourselves if we are around somebody who is arrogant. Why does it bother us? Do we feel like we are less? Do we lose our self-confidence in front of somebody who is arrogant? If we lose our self-confidence, that is our problem. Why should somebody’s arrogance make us doubt ourselves? Somebody is being arrogant, okay, they are arrogant, let it go. We can still have our own self-confidence.

When somebody does some big trip on us, we do not have to take it seriously and buy into it. I remember one time... I will probably never forget this situation.

I was at a retreat that my teacher was leading. There was one nun there who was taking care of the flowers on the altar. She did a very beautiful job. She had to leave the retreat early. So she left and the flowers continued to be on the altar. Well, the day after she left in the evening, I was walking back to my room and I was walking with one lay woman.

This lay woman started saying: “So and so used to do the flowers. And now none of the nuns are doing the flowers. It’s the nuns’ job to do the flowers. It’s really disgraceful because the flowers look so terrible and they are right in front of our teacher. The nuns should take care of them.”

And I was thinking: “Are you dropping a hint? Are you trying to make me feel guilty? Are you trying to pressure me? I don’t like it when people speak to me like that! You’re being arrogant. Why don’t you just do the flowers yourself?” My mind was ruminating inside like that. I was telling myself this story. I did not say any of it to her because I was trying to be a nice, sweet Buddhist. But inside I was thinking: “Why are you doing this guilt trip! So arrogant! Take care of the flowers yourself!”

I got back to my room and then I realized: “Wow, I’m getting really disturbed by what this person said!” And I thought about it: “You know, this isn’t the first time in my life that somebody is guilt-tripping and it’s not going to be the last time in my life that somebody is trying to do a guilt-trip. It’s not the first time somebody is being arrogant and bossing me around. And you know what? It’s not going to be the last time either.”

And so I just said to myself: “So be it! She has this idea that the nuns need to do the flowers. The flowers look fine to me. I didn’t see any proclamation on the door saying the nuns need to do the flowers. If they get really bad, I will do something. But until then, I’ll relax!”

Once I changed the way I thought, then my mind was peaceful. In my eyes anyway, the flowers still looked great. The point was really to ask myself: “Why am I disturbed by this?” It is not the first time somebody has talked to me this way and it is not going to be the last time. So I just have to get used to it.

We have run out of time but there are still many questions to be answered. For those of you whose questions I have not gotten to – and I will get to some of them tomorrow night – you might try looking in ‘I Wonder Why’ or ‘Buddhism for Beginners’ because those two books are all questions and answers that people most commonly ask.

Dedication

We will stop for the evening. Let's just do a short meditation before we call it an evening.

For a couple of minutes, let's just feel our fortune to be able to hear these teachings about bodhicitta. Tonight we heard about how difficult it was to have a precious human life with the ability to meet these teachings. How precious this evening has been that we are able to share these teachings on the wonderful bodhicitta together.

And how fortunate we are to be able to go home and continue thinking about these teachings and put them into practice.

And how much positive potential or merit we created by listening to the teachings, by contemplating them, and how much more we will create in the future through meditating on them and putting them into practice in our daily life.

So really rejoice at all this positive potential.

And think of the virtue and all the goodness in the world that is created due directly or indirectly to the bodhicitta, this spirit of perfect awakening, this altruistic intention to attain enlightenment for the benefit of each and every sentient being. Just rejoice at all that goodness, all that virtue.

And then let's dedicate it; let's send it out into the universe and think that it touches each and every living being no matter what realm they are born in, no matter what they are experiencing.

Imagine all that good karma, that positive potential, that merit, emanating from your heart in the form of light going out into the universe, and as it touches each and every living being, it calms their mind. It stills their mind and frees them from ignorance, attachment and anger. It frees their mind from self-centeredness.

And so by the power of our positive potential, may everybody be at peace within themselves. May everybody live peacefully together. May living beings create only positive karma. May all their negative karma and their causes be eliminated immediately through the power of this goodness that we have created.

May each and every living being be free of suffering. May they actualize their Buddha potential. May they become fully enlightened Buddhas.