

Commentary on
Shantideva's "A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life"
Chapter 2: Disclosure of Wrongdoing - Part 1 of 4
by Ven. Thubten Chodron©
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About Shantideva

Shantideva, the author of this text 'A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life', is one of the great Indian sages and practitioners of the 8th century. He was an extremely humble practitioner, and nobody knew of his great qualities because he kept them all very hidden.

He wasn't like us. We have one small quality and we advertise it to the world. We want everybody to know how marvelous we are. Shantideva had many great qualities but he kept them very secret, very hidden. He kept them so hidden that the people in his monastery thought he only did three things and gave him a nickname: the person who did three things.

What were the three things? He ate, he slept and he went to the toilet. That's all they thought Shantideva did. He was so humble that they thought he didn't know anything about the Dharma and was completely ignorant.

The people in the monastery wanted him to leave the monastery, but they could not just kick anybody out of the monastery, so they thought of a plan to make a fool of him and shame him into leaving. They asked him to give a big public teaching because they thought: "Oh, he's so foolish. He only does three things. He'll just look ridiculous and then he'll leave."

On the day of the teaching, these people prepared a huge throne for Shantideva to sit on, but they didn't provide any steps for him to get up to it. When Shantideva got there, as he was actually a highly realized practitioner with psychic powers, he put his hand on the throne, pushed the throne down, sat on it and then it went back up. Shantideva then proceeded to give this teaching.

Shantideva talked extemporaneously. He talked from his heart. There wasn't a prearranged script. He didn't have it all written out like a university professor presenting it at a conference. He just talked from his heart about how to practice. The audience was riveted. They couldn't believe that this person whom they thought was an idiot could speak such powerful Dharma!

When Shantideva got to Chapter Nine, which is the chapter on the wisdom realizing the nature of reality, i.e. the emptiness of inherent existence, he flew up into the sky and vanished. But they could still hear his voice teaching the rest of the chapter.

Shantideva did leave the monastery after that, but not for the reasons that those people wanted him to leave. He went off to practice more deeply.

I received the transmission of this text several times. The first teachings I had on it were from Geshe Sopa. I've also received it many times from His Holiness the Dalai Lama. It's quite a precious text. Everything you need to know in order to become a Buddha is in this book. We'll go through it and we'll learn.

Recap of the First Chapter: The Benefits of Bodhicitta

We covered the First Chapter on the Benefits of Bodhicitta in April 2006 when I was here.

Bodhicitta – you'll hear this word used very often as I speak. Bodhicitta is a primary mind that has two intentions. One intention is to work for the benefit of all sentient beings. The other intention is to become a fully enlightened Buddha in order to work for the benefit of all sentient beings.

'Bodhi' means awakening and 'citta' means mind. So this awakening mind is the motivation that takes us to full Enlightenment. It is the intention that was generated by all the previous Buddhas, is generated by all the present Buddhas, and will be generated by all the future Buddhas. You cannot become a Buddha without this motivation: the motivation to work for the benefit of sentient beings, thereby improving all of our capabilities and becoming a Buddha ourselves.

Bodhicitta is the source of all happiness

This bodhicitta mind is the source of all happiness. It is not only the mind that takes us to Enlightenment where there's definitely no more suffering, it is also the cause of our happiness while we're on the path.

Although I have not realized bodhicitta, I can say from my own personal experience that I have seen a huge change in my mind just by doing the meditations that help us to generate bodhicitta.

When I was younger, I used to have a lot of problem with depression. I used to ask what the meaning of life was. There's no meaning to life. All you do is get a job and make a lot of money, get married, have kids and then die. There's no meaning to life and I felt very discouraged and depressed about this.

The bodhicitta mind completely turned that around because it gives you a very strong meaning and purpose to your life. Your life is no longer just about making money and having friends and having a good time. Your life has a very special purpose now, because you're training so as to be able to benefit all living beings. You are not just benefiting all living beings by giving them food, clothing and things like that, you are benefiting them by leading them to full Enlightenment where they are never going to have any suffering whatsoever ever again.

Bodhicitta gives us security

Bodhicitta not only makes us feel good and happy right now, it also takes us to a state of actual security where we're never going to experience misery again.

People are always looking for security. We're trying so hard to be secure. You need your savings fund and you need your CPF. You think you have real security only when you have them, don't you? You think that when you have your bank account, your stocks, and you build them up, then you have real security.

Do those things really bring you real security? Even if you have hundreds and millions and zillions of dollars, do you ever feel a 100% secure? No! Because the very nature of cyclic existence – the state that we live in – is insecurity, because everything is changing all the time. You may have a lot of money, but there is an inflation and it's no longer worth as much as it was when you got it. No matter how many insurance policies you have, they can't prevent you from getting sick, because the very nature of having this kind of body is that it gets old and sick and dies.

So we run around trying to make ourselves secure, but we never reach real security.

The center of the universe

Every time we have a problem, we go into a crisis. When we have a problem we go: "Help! I have a problem! What am I going to do?" We get very upset. We talk to our friends. We tell our friends our problems – on and on and on. And our friend is going: "Oh this is so boring! I love this person but they tell me their problems every time I see them."

But for us, our problem is so interesting, isn't it? We can talk about our problem over and over again because we think our problem is the worst problem in the entire universe. Why? Because it's *my* problem! That makes it the worst thing. Why? Because *I'm* the centre of the universe. Everything should be the way *I* want it to be. If it's not, then something's really wrong!

We get all bent out of shape because everything doesn't happen the way we wanted. We compound our problem by feeling sorry for ourselves.

Some of you may know that I do work with prison inmates in the US. I write to them. I go and teach Buddhism in prisons. One of the inmates coined the phrase 'a pity party'. You know self-pity? We throw ourselves a pity party where we just feel sorry for ourselves. We're the guest of honor at the party. Everything revolves completely around us and everybody is supposed to feel sorry for us. Of course all of our friends are going to get bored, which shows how 'stupid' they are because our problem is so interesting. So we just throw our pity party alone and feel sorry for ourselves and go around saying "Poor me!"

That's our 'mantra'. 'Om mani padme hum' goes out the window. We take out our prayer beads and chant 'Poor me' instead. [laughter]

We have our little pity party. We do our 'mantra'. But nothing changes. Well, actually something changes – we usually feel worse. Whenever we feel sorry for ourselves, we make our misery more intense because there was the initial problem and in addition, we have the problem of getting depressed about the problem. And then we have the problem of getting angry because we have gotten depressed about the problem. And then we get discouraged because we've gotten angry at our depression over the problem.

Do you see what's going on? Everything is just circling around *me*. It's all about *me*!

I get these emails sometimes from people wanting to reprint material that I've written. A couple of months ago, I got a request from a magazine. Before I gave them my permission, I have to look and see what the magazine is about. The name of the magazine is 'Me'. Their purpose is to teach you that it is all about *me*. That's their byline: 'it's all about me'.

So I wrote them a letter and say: 'You can use my material, but I really disagree with what you're saying, because in my whole life, my training as a Buddhist is to overcome the thought that it's all about *me*.'

That thought that it's all about *me* leads us to so much suffering and so much misery. Yet this is what our 21st century society is teaching us. This is what the advertising industry is encouraging us to believe because you sell more things if you tell everybody it's all about *me*.

Even on the short 10-15 minute car ride here, I saw a bus advertisement encouraging people to speak better English. What do they have written on the side of the bus? "This is mine."

That's one of the first things we learnt to say when we were two years old, isn't it? All of you who are parents who've had two-year-old kids. What's the first thing that a two-year-old learn? They learn 'mummy' and 'daddy' and then they learn 'mine!'

So here it is, right on the side of the bus, teaching us: 'This is mine!' We repeatedly get this message that it's all about *me*, because the advertising industry thinks that it's going to sell more stuff if it convinces us that it's all about us. Since it's all about us, we can buy everything we want. We can consume everything we want. We can have everything we want. We get this mentality that the whole world should revolve around *me*.

Focusing on our own happiness brings misery

The more we think like that, the more miserable we are. You think that the more we focus on ourselves and try to be happy, the happier we will be. But actually it's just the opposite. The more we're focused on ourselves, the more miserable we are. Why? Because we become so super-sensitive about every tinny winny thing that has to do with me. Everything that has to do with me becomes blown up out of proportion and we become miserable!

We're at work and somebody doesn't say 'Hello' in the morning. We're so offended! "My colleague didn't say 'hello'. I don't know what's wrong. Something must be very wrong with him. Or maybe something's wrong with me. Oh no!" And then we get all worried.

Maybe our colleague didn't feel well. That's why they didn't say 'Good Morning'. Or maybe they were in the middle of finishing something and they didn't say 'Good Morning'. But we make it into this whole big personal trip and then we worry about the relationship.

So you see how thinking about ourselves makes us miserable? When that self-centered attitude is so strong, we invent problems that aren't even there. We completely create problems for ourselves.

More people are afraid of speaking to a group than they are of dying

When you're going into a room to meet people or when you're giving a presentation to a group of people, you may get really nervous. Why is that? What is the root of being nervous? Why are we nervous? Because we're afraid that we'll make a mistake and look like an idiot. Isn't it? We're totally self-focused. We don't care about the other people; we just care about *me*! "I don't want to look bad!"

I heard about a study that some psychologists did. When they tabulated the results, more people were afraid of speaking in front of a group than they were of dying. Isn't that amazing? More people are afraid of speaking in front of a group. Why? Because they might look like an idiot. They're more afraid of looking like an idiot than they are of dying. Something is wrong with this attitude.

The incredible self-consciousness we have, the lack of self-esteem – being too shy, getting so angry – they all come because we're just spinning around ourselves, thinking: "I'm so important. Everything should happen the way I want it to."

How bodhicitta overcomes misery and brings happiness

If we look in our life, we will see that this self-centered mind is the root of our suffering. Why is bodhicitta so beneficial? Because it's the thing that counteracts the self-centered mind. It's the total opposite of our self-preoccupied mind, because with bodhicitta, that aspiration for Enlightenment for the benefit of all beings, we're completely focused on what is beneficial for all sentient beings.

Of course it includes ourselves, but we're only one sentient being. We're not the centre of the universe. So by focusing our attention on and taking care of others, by having compassion for others, actually we feel happier ourselves. When we stop trying so hard to make things the way we want them to be, then we start accepting things for what they are. We become much more content. We become much happier.

Of course we still try and improve society but we're not doing it for our own benefit. We're doing it for the benefit of all beings. Our mind is happier because we have a much larger perspective and we're working for the benefit of all sentient beings.

We're also happier when we generate bodhicitta because our heart is full of love for others. Whenever we see any other person, our instant reaction is: "That's somebody who is lovable. That's somebody who has been kind to me."

That's very different from how we look at people now when we're self-centered, isn't it? What's our first thought now when we see somebody?

"Do they like me?"

Isn't that one of our first thoughts when we meet somebody?

"Do they like me? Am I safe around them? Are they going to be nice to me? Am I going to like them? Are they going to give me what I want? Am I going to talk them into thinking that I'm a good person?"

This is what our first thought is. We can see how that thought just breeds so much insecurity, so much lack of self-confidence. But when we drop that self-centered thought and turn our attitude to benefiting others instead, then our heart is so open and so joyful because whenever we see anybody, our thought is: "Here's a person who is kind. Here's a person who is lovable."

And so instead of worrying about what they think of us and whether we are good enough, our focus is: "How can we help this person? How can I lead them to Enlightenment? How can I make their lives easier? How can I make them happier?" Our attention is totally focused on bringing long-term benefit to others. When our mind has that kind of intention, our mind is relaxed, peaceful and joyful and we're not filled with self-doubt.

Bodhicitta makes the mind incredibly strong in the face of difficulties

In addition, when we have this bodhicitta mind that cherishes others, we have a very strong ability to go through difficulties. We don't get discouraged. We don't get depressed. We don't get overburdened and collapse from anxiety and fear when there's a problem. Bodhicitta makes the mind incredibly strong so that you're not afraid of the future. You're not afraid of anybody because your heart is so filled with love and compassion that there is no room for fear.

Think about it. When you really care about others, is there room for fear in your mind? When you're genuinely focused with compassion on the welfare of others, you automatically don't feel afraid, because your whole focus in life is different. So it gives you the ability to go through all sorts of problems.

We all have problems in our life, don't we? We moan and groan about our problems. But are we a refugee? No. You look at the Dalai Lama. He became a refugee when he was twenty-four years old. He had to assume responsibility to lead his people when he was fifteen years old.

Think back to when you were fifteen. Were you ready to be the Prime Minister? I wasn't. You look at His Holiness' life. He had to assume the responsibilities of something comparable to a Prime Minister when he was fifteen. When he was twenty-four, he had to flee his country because the Communists were trying to kill him. He hasn't been able to return to his country. In the meantime there has been genocide. The Communists have dumped nuclear waste and all kinds of toxic materials in the open spaces of Tibet.

We think we have problems? Our problems are really insignificant sometimes when we compare them with the problems of other people and what they've gone through in their lives.

Singapore is such a peaceful country. People have enough to eat. You have very good social policies here, so there're not many people or any people living on the streets. But still we managed to invent problems, didn't we?

When you have bodhicitta, your mind doesn't invent problems. Because the mind is focused with love and compassion on caring about others, there is an incredible sense of contentment and peace within our own heart.

Even if we have problems... take the example of the Dalai Lama. He is now a refugee but when you see him, is he walking around moaning: "Oh, I'm a refugee. I haven't been able to go back to my country." He's not walking around like that. He's happy. He's joyful. He's not all angry about it. Well, that's by the power of his great compassion and bodhicitta.

Cultivating love and compassion by remembering the kindness of others

The first chapter of this book talks about bodhicitta. It tries to get us to see the benefits of cultivating love and compassion for all beings. We do that by remembering the kindness of others, how people have been kind to us. We can see the kindness of our family very easily, but we also want to train our mind to see the kindness of strangers, of people whom we don't know. So think today of how many people we have benefited from whom we don't even know.

For example, we're sitting in Tai Pei Buddhist Centre right now. This centre was founded by Ven. Fa Kuan due to her vision. She was an incredible Singaporean nun whom I was privileged to meet and I actually stayed at her temple when I first came to Singapore in 1987. She had a vision to build this and so many people gave donations to build this center that we're sitting in right now.

Do we know the people who built this? Do we know all the donors who supported her vision to build this centre? Do we know the construction workers or the architect or the engineer or the plumber or the electrician?

I don't think we know any of those people, do we? And yet we're enjoying the fruits of all their labors, because we just come here this evening and here's this beautiful temple where we can sit down in a peaceful environment. They've even set up a good acoustic system so that you can hear the teachings without any echo.

We benefited from so many people's thoughtfulness and so many people's care for us to build this place so that we could come and listen to teachings and create merit. We don't even know those people and yet we have benefited so much from what they've done.

You think about it. It's really incredible. Think about all the food you ate today. Do you know the people who grew the rice you ate? Do you grow any rice in Singapore? I don't think so. It's all imported, isn't it? So here's all these people from other countries who grew the food that you ate today. Do you know any of them?

People who work in the rice paddies. It's not easy working in a rice paddy. It's hot. Your back hurts. The people who planted the rice, who harvested it, who prepared it. Just the food we eat – we don't even know where it came from anymore and all the people involved in making it. When we get the food, we just think: "Oh good. This is for me." But wait a minute. It came due to the kindness of so many people who grew it, and these people are total strangers. We wouldn't be alive if it weren't for their kindness and their efforts.

So when we examine and see how many people are involved in just keeping us alive, then we have a tremendous sense of gratitude for the kindness that we've experienced in our life. When we see others as

kind, then automatically they appear as lovable and beautiful to us. When they appear as lovable, we're not afraid of them anymore.

Prison visits

I mentioned the prison work that I do in the US. I've also been to a prison in Singapore a couple of times and I'll be going again on this visit. Sometimes people say to me: "Aren't you afraid to go into prisons?" And I go: "No, why should I be afraid?" In the US we have much more crime than you have in Singapore. Your government is much wiser here and they don't allow any of the citizens to have guns. In America, people can have guns and it's the cause of many problems. But the government doesn't want to change it.

Anyway, I'm not afraid when I go into prisons. People ask: "Why not?" Well, because when I go in, those people are teaching me something, and I'm very grateful to them. I have learnt so much from the inmates that I would never ever have learnt if I have not met them. How can I even explain it – what they teach me?

They are people who can be very honest. At least the people who write to me, they are very honest. They're really seeking the Dharma. They actually want to practice. What is very wonderful about them is they are ready to admit their faults.

Most of us who are not inmates, we cover up our faults, don't we? We make mistakes and we go: "It wasn't me. It was him." In our work place, we make a mistake and we go: "Oh no, it's not my fault. That's because so and so did that." We're always covering up for ourselves.

The inmates whom I work with are willing to look and be honest with themselves. That's a quality I really appreciate. So when I'm with them, I'm not afraid of them because they have that quality of being honest about the mistakes that they've made.

They give me an opportunity to overcome my fear, because some of the people I work with have done the things that I am most afraid of. But being a Buddhist, a nun and having taken the bodhisattva vows – when you take the bodhisattva vows, you're committed to helping sentient beings – you can't tune people out just because they've done things that you're afraid of.

The inmates have shown me how to overcome my fear of people and how to be very broad-minded and to learn that people make mistakes but they're not evil people. And to learn that if I can forgive them for the mistakes that they've made, then I can also forgive myself for the mistakes I've made. And learning how to forgive ourselves is something very important in order to have a peaceful heart. They've taught me all these. So I can see them as lovable in that way and appreciate them as being kind.

Everybody has been kind

What I'm getting at is when we subdue our self-centered mind and turn our focus on others, we can see that we've benefited from everybody. We've benefited from the strangers who feed us, who give us shelter, who make our clothes. We have even benefited from people who have harmed us or people who have done very negative actions because they teach us things that we could never have learnt otherwise.

We've all encountered people who have harmed us, right? But haven't we learnt something very important from the harm that we've received? Think about it. Would you be the same person now if you had not received the harm that you had received throughout your life? Sometimes when we go through difficulties, we learn about ourselves. We generate skills and find internal resources that we never could have found otherwise. So when we see that, then we even have to say 'thank you' to the people who harmed us. They've helped us become stronger through going through the difficulties.

When we train our mind to see the benefits that we have received from friends, strangers and even people who have harmed us, then we discover that it's possible to generate love and compassion for everybody. We will also find that when we generate love and compassion, not only do others benefit, but we also benefit.

So, this is the essence of Chapter One of the book, seeing the benefits of bodhicitta.

Chapter Two: Disclosure of Wrongdoing

Now we're going to get into the actual teaching on Chapter Two that we're doing in these four days. So, let's look at the text.

Chapter Two is called the 'Disclosure of Wrongdoing'. Let me just give a little introduction to this chapter.

Before we can generate this loving compassionate attitude of bodhicitta, we have to do two things: we have to purify our negative karma and we have to create a great deal of merit or positive potential. This chapter, the Disclosure of Wrongdoing, is really focused on that, on helping us to disclose the mistakes that we've made, just like the prisoners whom I was talking about. It's teaching us to be very, very honest. So this chapter is helping us to purify and it's also going to teach us how to create merit.

So remember, this book is written in the first person, so Shantideva's telling us what he thinks and how he practices. Sometimes we wonder: "What does a bodhisattva think about? What are their minds like?" Shantideva's telling us in this text. We're getting a first person's view of what it's like.

So he starts out and he says:

Chapter 2, Verse 1:

1. In order to adopt that jewel of the mind, I make offerings to the Tathagatas, to the stainless jewel of the sublime Dharma, and to the Children of the Buddhas, who are oceans of excellent qualities.

When he says 'In order to adopt that jewel of the mind', the 'jewel of the mind' refers to the bodhicitta. In order to adopt it, we have to create positive potential or merit, and we do that by making offerings. So Shantideva makes offerings to the Tathagatas, in other words to the Buddhas, to the 'stainless jewel of the sublime Dharma', and to the 'Children of the Buddhas' – the bodhisattvas, who are 'oceans of excellent qualities'.

The Buddha, Dharma and Sangha

Let's pause for a minute here and talk about the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. If we are Buddhist or even if we are just thinking about Buddhism, we should know what the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha are. They are called the Three Jewels, and we take refuge in them. We go to them for our spiritual guidance.

The Dharma is the real refuge

The Dharma is the real refuge, because the Dharma refers to the path to liberation and all the cessations of suffering and the cessations of the causes of suffering. That's what the Jewel of the Dharma refers to. When we actualize the Dharma in our own heart, that is the real protection. That is actual security. Because when we've actualized the path to Enlightenment in our heart, when we've ceased all suffering and the causes of suffering, then we have actual security. We have actual happiness and joy. So the Dharma, when we actualize it in our own heart, is our real refuge.

The Buddha, the one who taught the Dharma

Here the Buddha is called the Tathagata, the translation of which is the 'One Gone to Thusness' or the 'One Thus Gone'. It means the one who perceives the nature of reality. The Buddha is the one who taught the Dharma.

The Buddha did not invent the Dharma. The Buddha did not create us. The Buddha did not create the path to Enlightenment. The Buddha learnt how things operate – what are the causes of suffering, what are the causes of happiness. He created all the causes of happiness in his own mind and then as a fully enlightened being, out of compassion, his whole purpose was to teach us how to create the causes of happiness and abandon the causes of misery.

The Buddha is the one who taught the Dharma and he taught it out of his own experience. So everything that we learnt about in the Buddha's teachings is something that somebody has experienced. It's not abstract philosophy. It's actually enlightened beings telling us what it's like to be an enlightened being from their own experience. So we can really trust the Dharma or the teachings that the Buddha has taught because they are coming out of the Buddha's own experience.

The Sangha

The Buddha taught the teachings to his disciples and his disciples actualized those teachings as well. The Buddha lived in the 6th century, and so for 2500 years, there have been realized practitioners who have actualized the Dharma that the Buddha taught. The realized practitioners who have generated the aspiration for Enlightenment, the bodhicitta, are called bodhisattvas.

When it says the 'Children of the Buddha' or the 'Children of the Conqueror', it's referring to those bodhisattvas. The bodhisattvas have such intense love and compassion for us that they would be happy to give up their own Enlightenment and stay in the cycle of existence that we're stuck in if it were beneficial for them to do so. That's how much love and compassion they have for us sentient beings.

Bodhisattvas, in fact, don't give up their Enlightenment and stay in cyclic existence, because they see that they can be of greater benefit to others when they become fully enlightened Buddhas. So Kuan Yin, for example, has actually gone on to become a Buddha. So has Manjusri and Samantabhadra. They've all become Buddhas, but they appear in the form of a bodhisattva demonstrating that incredible compassion that says: "I'm willing to even give up my own Enlightenment if that would be of greater benefit to others."

They see that it is of greater benefit to others if they become Buddhas so they complete the path. By doing so they have more abilities to help us. But they're so astounding because they are willing to give up any kind of self-happiness, worldly or spiritual, by the power of their compassion.

Why make offerings?

In this verse, it's saying that we make offerings to the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha, the bodhisattvas.

Why do we make offerings? If you were a Buddha, do you need somebody to offer you flowers? If you're a woman who wants to make sure that your boyfriend loves you, or if you're a guy wanting to show your girlfriend that you love her, you get her flowers. Our ego needs to get flowers, doesn't it? And our ego needs to give flowers.

But when we are offering to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, does the Buddha need flowers? Does the Buddha need oranges and apples to be happy? Does the Buddha need incense or light? If you are a fully enlightened being, you are in a realm of bliss. Forget about apples and oranges! They will not do much for you, not even chocolate! [laughter]

We make offerings to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha because it's important for us to learn how to give. One of the chief qualities of a bodhisattva that we aspire to develop is generosity. Actually one of the chief qualities of a kind human being is generosity, isn't it? This whole world functions by people being generous.

We make offerings in order to increase our generosity and to train our mind to take delight in being generous. By being generous to others, we create a lot of merit or positive potential that enriches our own mind. This makes it easier for us to gain spiritual realizations. In addition, merit or positive potential is good karma, so it creates the cause for us to have happiness in this life and in future lives.

Today we had food to eat. We may have taken all the food we ate for granted, because there is food everyday, isn't there? You just go to the stall and you buy food. We happen to be incredibly fortunate here in Singapore where there's so much food.

There're places on this planet where there is no food. You go to Darfur in Africa right now. There's no food. There's no water. There're people on this planet who are starving.

We just go to the market and buy food, and we have so much excess food that we sometimes even throw it away. Isn't that incredible? We just throw away food while there're people on this same planet who don't have enough to eat!

Why is it that we have food and other people don't? Well, in a worldly way, part of it has to do with the political system. Part of it has to do with whether there is war or peace in the country. Part of it has to do with the climate, whether there is a drought. There are certain causes that happen now. But why are we born here instead of being born in Darfur? Why are we born in a place where there is food aplenty and not where there's a drought and warfare?

That happens because of our good karma from previous lives. We have food today because we were generous sharing food, sharing things with others in the past. What we receive today is a product of the causes that we created in the past, so receiving things is a result of generosity, of giving.

There is one way to express the law of karma: what goes around comes around. What you give out into the universe comes around to you. When we are generous, our own fortune increases. When we are cruel, other people become mean to us.

Karma doesn't always ripen in the lifetime that we created it in. But we do experience the results of the actions that we created. In particular here, we are able to eat today because we were generous. We made offerings to other sentient beings in the past or maybe we made offerings to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha in the past. As a result, we have food to eat today.

When we understand karma and look at our own life and see the fortune that we have now and know the kind of causes we created in the past to have this fortune, then that gives us a lot of inspiration to keep creating all those kinds of causes in the future.

So instead of just saying: "Oh, I created some good karma in the past, now I'm reaping the benefits of it. Isn't this jolly?" we use our resources again to share, to create more merit, because it enriches our mind and it makes not only this life better but also future lives better and it enables us to gain Dharma realizations. When we are generous, it also creates happiness in the world. It creates beauty in the world.

Like I was saying, we're here in this hall tonight due to the generosity of all the people who made donations so that it could be built. Those people were making offerings to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha to build a place where we could make more offerings and have more teachings.

What do we offer?

So what do we offer? The chapter continues. It says:

Chapter 2, Verses 2-3:

2. As many flowers, fruits, and medicinal herbs as there are, and as many jewels as there are in the world, and clear and pleasant waters,

3. Jeweled mountains, forested regions, and other delightful and solitary places, vines shining with the ornaments of lovely flowers, and trees with branches bowed with delicious fruit,

These are just two of the offering verses. There're more to come. I want to tell you how to listen to it as I'm reading this and as you read along with me. When we're reading this, imagine all of these things and imagine that you're offering them to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. Don't read these like you are reading a textbook. We're not merely studying what Shantideva did: "Oh, he did this and that." He's offering these things himself and by it being written in the first person and our saying: "I offer this" and "I offer that", then in our own heart, in our own mind, let's imagine all these things and offer them.

Why imagine rather than make actual offerings?

Now you might say: "What's the use of imagining all these things? Shouldn't I make actual offerings?" Well, yes, it is good to make actual offerings, and people do offer flowers, light, incense, fruit and everything. They make offerings to build the building. They make offerings to bring teachers here. We do make actual offering. But it's also important to imagine offerings. There are a few reasons for imagining offerings.

One is when we imagine beautiful things, our mind feels happy. When we imagine beautiful things and then we give them away to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha for whom we have the utmost love and respect, then our heart feels even happier. Then our mind really takes delight in giving, takes delight in being generous. It creates an incredibly happy state in our own mind.

Think about it. If you imagine dirty, yucky places, then your mind feels a little bit discouraged, doesn't it? If I say: "Think of a dirty, filthy place with rats crawling around," you go "Yuck!" So that affects your mood.

If I say: "Think of flowers and fruits and medicinal herbs and jewels and clear and pleasant waters and jeweled mountains and forests and flowers and trees and flowers and vines and parks and lakes and oceans," and things like this, doesn't your mind feel a lot happier just even thinking about those things?

Maybe for Singaporeans, instead of talking about natural places, maybe I should say imagine piles of money. Oh, then everybody feels so happy! See, all the Singaporeans, now you're very happy. Piles of money. And

more piles. Piles of gold and piles of jewel. Piles of stocks and piles of bonds. And more piles of money of all the currencies in the world. Infinite piles!

And you have piles of ATM machines and credit cards galore and checkbooks that are infinite in how many checks you can write. And credit cards with no limit! Millions of Orchard Roads. The world is pathed with Orchard Roads and you can go in and get anything you want and even ten things of anything you want!

Got it now?

Now, imagine offering all of that to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, offering it with a feeling of happiness because you love the Buddha, the Dharma and the bodhisattvas and arhats. You want all sentient beings to be happy. You know that if you offer all these piles of money and jewels and Orchard Roads to them, they will use them to benefit all other living beings, because they have absolutely no attachment to these things.

Okay? So we have to rewrite Shantideva's text so that you get the idea. [laughter]

But let's go back to what Shantideva is saying. Maybe you'll learn to appreciate nature a little bit too as we are reading them. Where I live at Sravasti Abbey, we have 240 acres of land. I really love nature so I like these verses very much. We'll read a few more of the verses. Really imagine offering them as we do.

Chapter 2, Verses 4-5:

4. Fragrances and incenses, wish-fulfilling trees, jeweled trees, lakes adorned with lotuses, enchanting calls of wild geese in the worlds of gods and other celestials,

5. Uncultivated crops, planted crops, and other things that ornament the venerable ones, all these that are unowned and that extend throughout space,

We're offering even things that don't belong to us. They don't need to belong to us for us to offer them because we're offering the beauty and it makes our mind so happy to offer beauty, to think of beauty.

Chapter 2, Verse 6:

6. I bring to mind and offer to the Foremost of Sages together with their Children. May those worthy of precious gifts, the greatly merciful ones, compassionate toward me, accept these from me.

The 'Foremost of Sages' refers to the Buddhas. 'Their children' refers to the bodhisattvas.

We're asking the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha to please accept our offerings: "I've imagined all these beautiful things and I'm offering them with a mind of faith. Please accept my offerings."

Making a karmic connection

When you offer like this, you imagine the whole sky filled with Buddhas, bodhisattvas and other holy beings. The whole sky is filled with all the offerings and you present them to the holy beings. Whenever you offer someone something, you are making a karmic connection with them. Even when we offer things to human beings, we're making a connection with them. When we offer things to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, we're making a connection with them.

The connection with the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha is the most important connection that we make in our lives because people, human beings, they come and they go. The Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, if we have them in this life and in next life and the lives after that, then they will lead us out of the misery of cyclic existence and to Enlightenment. Making a strong connection with the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha is extremely important.

There's one Chinese word for karmic connection: *yuan*. When we make offerings to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, we're making that very strong connection with them. That's an extremely important connection for us to make because when we die, if we remember that connection with the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, then our mind will be completely peaceful. We'll have a good rebirth. We'll be able to keep practicing in the future. So it's a very, very important connection.

Questions and Answers

[Audience:] I heard a speaker mentioning that it is impossible to live a 100% virtuous life. Is this true? Can we be considered a Buddhist if we are not completely virtuous?

[Ven. Chodron:] I think it's very important to remember that all Buddhists are not Buddhas. There's a difference between a Buddhist and a Buddha. In every religion, there's the holy beings and then there's the rest of us.

Why are we Buddhists? Because we're trying to practice what the Buddha taught. Practice implies that you haven't mastered it yet. Practice implies that you do it again and again to improve the state of your mind. So yes, we can be Buddhists even if we are imperfect human beings. In fact, only the Buddhas are perfect in the sense of having a 100% virtuous motivation all the time. The rest of us, we have some way to go before our minds are completely pure. But still we are practicing and by transforming our minds into a virtuous state, we're benefiting ourselves and we're benefiting the entire society.

When you quoted somebody as saying we cannot live a 100% virtuous life, I think in the case of the high-level bodhisattvas, they are doing a pretty good job of doing that. The rest of us are trying to emulate them. But don't think it's impossible, because if we think something is impossible, then we'll never get there.

If we see that the qualities of the Buddhas are qualities we ourselves can develop, then we'll feel much more invigorated and will practice more to try and develop those qualities. Although we do have negative motivations and we sometimes lose our temper or we may sometimes speak harsh words, practicing definitely improves the state of our mind and helps us and benefits others, and we'll slowly, gradually get better. It's completely okay to be this kind of Buddhists because that's the kind of Buddhists we are! But we're trying and that's the important thing.

[Audience:] You mentioned that we're fortunate to be born here and not in Darfur. What is the karmic cause for being born in Darfur?

All of us have in the past committed some wholesome karma and some unwholesome karma. Even in this lifetime, we've done some good things. We've been kind. We've also been mean. Right? So we have all sorts of karmic seeds in our mindstream. We have positive karmic seeds. We have negative karmic seeds. We even have karma that is kind of neutral, that doesn't bring either happiness or unhappiness.

At the time of death, some of that karma ripens and throws us or propels us into our next rebirth. Not all of the karma ripens at once because our mindstream is full of this incredible diversity of karmic seeds. Whatever karma ripens at the moment of death is going to be the foremost one propelling us into taking a certain rebirth.

The thought we have at the time of death is very important because that thought influences what kind of karma will ripen. Also, the actions we did repeatedly in our life make certain karmas heavier and thus more likely to ripen.

In terms of the people born in a situation where there is a lot of poverty and warfare, first of all, they are born as human beings. Being born as a human being is a result of good karma. Even if they're born in a place where there's poverty and warfare, being born as a human being is the result of having kept ethical discipline in a previous life. Having refrained from harmful actions – from killing, stealing, lying and so forth – is the cause of their being born in a human body. That's also why we're born in a human body this lifetime.

If we're born in a place where there's a lot of drought, it is very often the result of miserliness or stinginess. This is because in a place where there's a drought, nothing grows. In a place where we don't share, then people don't have.

Being born in a place with drought can also be a result of wrong views, for example saying that it's impossible to become enlightened, or that karma and its effects don't exist. In a mind that has wrong views, virtue cannot grow very easily. So our environment becomes like that, a place where food doesn't grow very easily. So being born in a place where there's a lack of food is due to negative karma.

When we live in a place where this is violence or warfare around us, it could be a result of our having been violent in a previous life. So maybe having been soldiers or rebels or something similar in a previous life.

Maybe having beaten people up or harmed them in a previous life, then that results in our being born in that kind of place right now.

It's important to remember when we think like this, that none of our births are permanent. We might be born in a place where there is peace and food right now, but that does not mean that we are always going to have such a life. We have negative karmic seeds on our mindstream that could ripen at the end of our life and in the next life we could be born in Darfur. And the person who was born in Darfur may be reborn in Singapore. None of the lives we live are permanent. They're always changing.

I find it quite interesting when you read the newspaper, to see the news as a teaching on karma. When you read the newspaper and you see the situations that people experience, we can think of the kind of actions people must have created to have that kind of experience now. Whatever kind of action that creates that kind of negative experience, I want to make sure I don't do it in my life. When I see people having harmful things happen to them, I don't want to create the cause of that.

When I read the newspaper and I see people having good things happen, I want to create the cause of that so I think about what kind of karma could have created the cause for happiness and I want to put my energy in that direction.

So when we read the newspaper, we can read it like it's a teaching on karma. It's very helpful that way. It's a wakeup call for us to not take our good fortune for granted, so that we really are very conscientious about trying to act in kind ways and refrain ourselves from unwholesome behavior.

[Audience:] Can one choose not to be reborn?

[Ven. Chodron:] The only way not to be reborn is to realize the nature of reality so that we eliminate the ignorance, anger, clinging attachment and karma that cause rebirth. It's not as if we can say: "Well, I don't feel like getting reborn," and we will not be reborn. Sometimes we say: "I don't feel like going to work today," and we stay home. But it's not like that with rebirth.

We're going to get reborn because we're under the power of ignorance; we don't understand the nature of reality. If we don't want to get reborn, we need to put a lot of effort into practicing the path that the Buddha taught, because that path will teach us how to cease the causes of rebirth in this cycle of existence, this cycle of constantly recurring problems.

The chief thing that will prevent rebirth is wisdom, generating the wisdom that understands that things lack all the fanciful ways of existence that we project on them. If we meditate on that, we will realize the lack of inherent existence, we will purify our mind of ignorance, anger and clinging attachment. At that point, then, we don't have to take rebirth.

In addition, if we have spent our life cultivating love and compassion, and if we choose to be reborn, we don't experience any suffering because our rebirth is coming from a place of compassion. So the great bodhisattvas who appear in our world don't experience suffering like we do as they are not reborn under the influence of ignorance.

[Audience:] You mentioned that what one is thinking at the point of death influences what karma will ripen for the next rebirth. What about people who die in their sleep who are not thinking at the time of death?

[Ven. Chodron:] Before you went to sleep, you were thinking about something. This is actually why it's very important, at the end of the day, before we go to sleep, to do some purification and to make sure that we go to sleep with a very peaceful mind so that we will sleep well and we will have pleasant dreams and we will wake up with a good thought in our mind. And then if we die in our sleep, some good karma will ripen. But it's very important to try and do some purification in the evening and make peace with what happened during the day so that our heart and mind is peaceful when we sleep.

[Audience:] Are gurus who know their death and have the ability to meditate through their death able to choose their rebirth?

[Ven. Chodron:] There are some realized beings who can meditate while they are dying. These people don't need to be recognized as gurus and not all gurus have this ability. There are some people who, because of their excellent practice at the time they die, are able to meditate right through it. That's happening because of the power of their spiritual realizations. These people have realized the nature of reality. They've realized emptiness, or maybe they've realized bodhicitta, and so when they die, their minds are very smooth, very peaceful. If they're following the Mahayana path where their purpose is to benefit others, then they can choose where they're going to be reborn because they want to be reborn with people whom they have that connection with, so that they can benefit them more.

[Audience:] Are you able to see the good karma from getting ordained from your own experience?

[Ven. Chodron:] Well, I can say that being ordained has really changed my mind. When you hold vows, after a while of holding vows, you can feel this shift in your mind. It comes very, very gradually, and I think it comes because you have intentionally refrained from harmful actions and you are intentionally trying to behave in kind ways. Through the power of keeping the vows, you feel that you are being held up by some support of good karma.

There is that kind of shift in your mind because when we go through our life creating a lot of negative karma, we tend to have a lot of guilt. We have a lot of remorse. There can be a lot of fear and a lot of worry. When we keep precepts, we stop creating that kind of karma and we're purifying our mind in a much more intense way, so you start feeling that support by the positive karma.

As lay people, you can take the five lay precepts and keep them, and that acts as a support for you're building up that good karma that changes your mind.

For those of you who have the thought to ordain, I really encourage you to explore that, because it's a wonderful life and it enables you to purify your mind much more quickly and create a great deal of positive potential. So I would certainly encourage you in that direction.

For the people who choose to remain as lay people, I encourage you to take the five precepts and to practice as best as you can on a daily basis.

[Audience:] We know the importance of being loyal to our loved ones. What happens if one repeatedly commits adultery? How does one prevent it from happening?

[Ven. Chodron:] Well, you're not being loyal, are you? How to keep it from happening? First of all, think of the disadvantages. When you commit adultery, you are creating the cause to have a miserable marriage right now and you are creating the cause in future lives to have a lot of disharmony in your relationships. Does anybody here like disharmonious relationships? Does anybody here like relationships where you fight, where you don't trust each other, where you yell and scream at each other? Does anybody like that? No.

Having sexual relationships outside of your committed relationship, or even if you're single, going with somebody who is in a relationship, creates the karma for that kind of result. You can see it right away because when you commit adultery, your marriage becomes a mess.

And what happens to your kids? Kids know that mum or dad has been fooling around. The kids know it. How does it affect your kids? How does it affect all the people around you? How do you feel about yourself? You have your little bit of pleasure, for half an hour. Is it worth all the misery afterwards for that little bit of pleasure?

So when you think of the disadvantages of adultery and the advantages of taking the time and energy to build a good marital relationship, then you try and keep the third precept and not have extra-marital relationships.

[Audience:] Can negative karma be neutralized?

[Ven. Chodron:] Yes, it can be purified or neutralized. And in fact, if you go home and read the rest of this chapter, Shantideva's going to talk about how we neutralize or purify bad karma. All of us have created bad karma, so all of us need to do purification. In fact it's very good to do purification on a daily basis, because

then we don't stockpile a lot of guilt and a lot of remorse and a lot of uneasy feelings. Neutralizing our negative karma through doing purification is very helpful psychologically, because we don't feel weighed down and it alleviates our guilt. We're going to talk about how to do that in the next three days. So you got to come back for the next installment.

[Audience:] Can our merits be measured?

[Ven. Chodron:] Not in the same way that you weigh out how many kilograms of apples you have. And not in the way that you measure your bank account. Merit is not measured like that.

Merit is measured by the strength of our intention, and this is one of the reasons why bodhicitta is very important, because when we have that motivation to become enlightened for the benefit of all beings, we have the highest, most noble intention there is because we're concerned with every single living being. Any positive action we do with that motivation creates oceans and skies of merit. It creates an incredible amount of merit because we're thinking of the benefit of all living beings and we're thinking of the highest benefit – their Enlightenment.

So when we do even a small action like offering one single flower or a small action like being kind to the people whom we live with, if we do that with a motivation of bodhicitta, we create an incredible amount of merit. The strength of the merit depends to a large extent on our motivation.

[Audience:] Is there such a thing as karmic connection between people that explains why there is strong enmity between some people and good connection between others?

[Ven. Chodron:] Yes, there's karmic connection between people. This is one reason why in our life we try and be as kind to everybody as we can, because when we're kind, we're creating a good karmic connection with them, which means in the future, when we meet them, there will be an automatic bond. There will be some kind of trust. It'll also mean that in the future if we become bodhisattvas, we're going to be able to help these people because of the karmic connection.

This is one of the reasons why we make offerings to holy beings, because that's our way of creating a karmic connection with them so that it opens the door for them to be able to benefit us and lead us to Enlightenment. So yes, there is karmic connection between people.

Sometimes we may have a very uneasy feeling about somebody. We may have that feeling right away even before talking to them. I'm always a little suspicious of those feelings when that happens. I'll say: "Well maybe there's some negative karma between us in the past, but whatever was in the past is finished. Right now I want to create a good bond with that person, so let's treat them with kindness and let's reform whatever karma there was in the past."

[Audience:] Which is more important – training our mind and cultivating love and compassion or just doing mantra recitation? I heard that mantra recitation has many benefits and is a short cut to Enlightenment.

[Ven. Chodron:] The purpose of mantra recitation is to generate love and compassion. Cultivating our mind to generate love and compassion and training our mind – that's the real Dharma practice. Mantra recitation is said to help us do that. But just reciting mantra will not get you to Enlightenment because we have to train our mind. If reciting mantra alone could get you to Enlightenment, then all these little machines that chant 'Namo Amitufo' would have already become Buddhas because they chant much more mantra than we do. [laughter]

You can chant mantra but be completely distracted. You watch how people do chanting sometimes – yawning away or looking everywhere while they're chanting. Are you going to get enlightened chanting mantra like that? No.

Even if you keep complete silence but in your heart you practice forgiving the people whom you had enmity towards; even if you're not reciting one mantra but in your heart you are apologizing to people whom you've harmed and you're forgiving people who've harmed you, that's real practice and that creates incredible positive potential and incredible harmony in your life.

But if you recite zillions of mantra and as soon as you stop, go out and criticize other people, or get all arrogant: "I've recited so many mantra. Have you?", you will not get to Enlightenment no matter how many mantra you have recited.

It's the real transformation of the mind, of what's going on inside that counts. Reciting mantra is helping us to transform what goes on inside. Reciting mantra is useful, but it has to be coupled with the actual meditations on love and compassion. When we recite 'om mani padme hum', we should be thinking kind thoughts about others. You shouldn't be reciting 'om mani padme hum' and at the same time thinking of how to take revenge on somebody who hurt you.

When you recite 'om mani padme hum', think of Kuan Yin's qualities. Think of the qualities of Chenrezig or Avalokiteshvara. Try and generate those qualities. That will lead you to Enlightenment.

[Audience:] How do prayers and offerings made on behalf of people affect their karma and help them? Do ordained people have more potential to improve others' karma?

[Ven. Chodron:] We are the ones who create our own karma. Nobody else can create karma for us.

It's kind of like eating and sleeping. If you're tired, you have to sleep. You can pay a lot of money to other people to sleep, but you're not going to feel rested afterwards.

If you're hungry, you have to eat. You can't say: "Please eat for me. I don't have time."

It's the same thing with creating good karma. We have to do it ourselves. People who have precepts, by the fact of living in ethical conduct, when they create positive karma, it's heavier. So the good karma is heavier when it's created by people who're living in precepts. Therefore when you have your five lay precepts or if someone holds the monastic precepts, then yes, the karma that is created is richer to that extent.

But when, for example, our loved one dies and we ask people to do prayers for them, we should also be doing the prayers because we have the karmic connection with that person.

When we ask somebody to do prayers, we make offerings and by the fact of our making offerings, we're creating virtue and we dedicate that virtue for the welfare of our loved ones. We can't transfer the karma; it's not like people have karmic bank accounts. We don't transfer our good karma to them, but when we make offerings, when we make prayers, when we dedicate for them, when we ask other people to do prayers for them, then by the force of all these prayers, we're sending good energy towards those people, and that creates the opportunity for their own good karma to ripen.

You'll see in the brochure that you can request the community at Sravasti Abbey to make prayers for the sick, to clear obstacles, etc. When we do the prayers for these people, we're sending that positive energy towards them so that their own good karma can ripen. Therefore it's important that these people create good karma, which is why we ask these people to contemplate and recite the 'Four Immeasurables', because when they're reciting that, they're changing their mind and then when we do prayers for them, the prayers can really have some impact.

So it's both things together – the prayers and the creating of positive karma oneself.