

**Commentary on**  
**Shantideva's "A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life"**  
**Chapter 2: Disclosure of Wrongdoing - Part 2 of 4**  
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Last night I was talking a little about bodhicitta, the aspiration for Enlightenment and how it arises from great love and great compassion. Love is the wish for beings to have happiness and its causes. Compassion is the wish for sentient beings to be free of suffering and its causes.

**To generate bodhicitta, we need to reduce our self-preoccupation**

To generate the bodhicitta, one of the principal things we need to do is to reduce our self-preoccupation, our self-centeredness, the mind that is thinking: "Me! I'm the most important one in the whole wide world!" You know that mind? In order to get anywhere spiritually, we have to subdue that mind. Even to be happy in this lifetime, we've got to stop being so pre-occupied with ourselves.

**Why we face the same problems year after year**

I come to Singapore once a year. This year it's twice. I see lots of people. There are people I see every year when I come. Each year when I talk to them, they tell me their problems. And it's the same problem as the previous year, which was the same problem as the year before that, and the year before that, and the year before that. Each year I give them the same advice. But the next time I come they still have the same problem. So I wonder if they try practicing the advice or not.

Sometimes our self-centeredness works in such a way that we get a real charge off of having a problem. You know what I mean? When we have a problem, somehow, we feel very important. People have to listen to us. We make them listen to our problem whether they want to or not.

Sometimes I think we seem to suffer a lot from our problem but when we get some good advice about how to stop it, we don't follow the advice. As I've said, I'm not sure if we're really wanting to stop our problem or not, or if somehow we're comfortable having our problem.

You know what I mean? It's like if you have a problem, you know who you are. [laughter] It is a very strange way to form an identity, but we sure do it, don't we?

And so we just form these identities. We have these problems. We go through our life every year – same thing. Everyday –same thing. We're miserable, but we don't change. Whose doing is that? Why don't we change? Why don't we do something to stop our problem? This comes because the self-centered mind is just spinning around *me* and *my* problem, and how everybody doesn't treat *me* right. You know that one?

"People just don't treat me right lah! I'm so sweet. I'm so good-natured. I'm very kind. But my family – they just don't appreciate me. They treat me so mean."

"My colleagues talk behind my back. Nobody listens to me. I have so many problems because other people aren't very nice to me."

Right? We all have different varieties of the same story, don't we? Our basic complaint is that other people don't treat us so well. Don't you think so? Couldn't other people treat you a little better? Don't you think?

Don't you want your parents to treat you a little better? Or your kids to treat you better? Your boss should definitely treat you better! And if you're a boss, your employees should treat you better. We're always thinking that all of our problems, all of our dissatisfactions are due to somebody else's fault. If only they would change, then my problem would stop.

I think the reason why we have the same problem year after year is because we attribute the problem to somebody else. Since we can't control other people, then we just say: "I have this problem and it's all their fault. I'm just an innocent victim. There's nothing I can do about it except throw myself a pity party!"

Remember last night we talked about pity party? "Poor me! The world doesn't treat me right!" We throw our little pity party and feel sorry for ourselves. We complain about how other people mistreat us and do nothing to change our own mind or our own behavior.

Sometimes we're pretty stupid, don't you think? We expect other people to change. Can we control other people? No. We can't control them at all, can we? Can you make somebody else do something? Not really.

The one thing that we do have some sway over is our own mind. But do we try and change our own mind to solve our problem? No! We just keep saying: "It's his fault. It's her fault. It's their fault!" That kind of attitude is not going to change anything. We're just going to keep feeling sorry for ourselves and moaning about the same problem.

### Antidote to self-preoccupation

You know what I did at a retreat last year? When we do retreats, we tend to get stuck in our problems. You're trying to meditate on the breath. You're trying to say mantra. But all you do is think: "Poor me! All these people don't treat me right." You get angry at them. Same problem!

So what I have everybody in the retreat do is to write their problem on a piece of paper. We put all the problems in a basket and circulated the basket around the room. Each retreatant had to pick a problem that was not theirs. Then whenever they started to get distracted in their meditation, instead of obsessing about their own problem, they were supposed to obsess about this new problem that they had picked.

Do you get what I mean? You weren't allowed anymore to moan and groan about your own problem. Now you're supposed to sit there and ruminate and worry about somebody else's problem.

Well, you know what? People got bored very quickly. Other people's problems, worrying about their problems – it's not very interesting. But *my* problem – such a terrible problem! We can spin around that one for years and years making ourselves miserable.

Try this sometimes. It's a very good antidote. Whenever you start moaning about your problem, make yourself think about somebody else's problem instead. If you worried about your family, pretend that you live in Darfur and worry about a family in Darfur who doesn't have any food to eat. See if you can worry about that family all day long the same way as you worry about your own family.

When you're moaning about your job: "I don't like my job. My boss is so terrible!" or "My employees don't listen to me," then think of somebody who doesn't have a job and worry about them and their family instead. There're many people who don't have jobs.

When you're angry with or aggravated by something your family member is doing, then think about somebody who doesn't have a family and worry about their problem.

We have a cat at the Abbey. Our cat's name is Manjushri. Manjushri likes to be fed in the middle of the night. No matter what time you feed him during the day, even if you feed him right before you go to bed, you'll hear him at 2:30am or 3am: "Meow! Meow!" – he wants to eat.

There's one person in the house whom he always goes to for food. Nancy, who was having to get up in the middle of the night to feed Manjushri, was getting pretty exasperated by it.

Another resident of the Abbey then told her: "Well, maybe think about it this way: that one day he's not going to be here anymore to complain to you in the middle of the night."

Nancy loved this kitty and she realized: "Oh that's true! One day he will have died and there won't be a kitty to wake me up in the middle of the night."

This episode with Manjushri reminded Nancy of her father's phone calls and she told me this story. Nancy's dad lived on the other side of the US so they were three hours behind where Nancy was staying. But he would forget that and he would call when it was morning where he was but maybe three or four o'clock in the morning where Nancy was. His phone call would wake her up and she would get mad at him: "Dad! Don't you realize that you should call later and not wake me up because I'm sleeping?"

And then her housemate said to her: "You know, Nanc, one day your dad is not going to be there." And so she changed her mind about it and later when he kept calling and waking her up, she stopped complaining because she realized that having her father in her life was very precious and he wasn't always going to be there. So even if he called at inconvenient times and woke her up, it was sure better than not having her father at all.

What I'm saying is that many of the people whom we complain about as being the causes of our problems – think about it – one day they may not be there. How are you going to feel when they're not in your life anymore?

Fast forward your life. Pretend you're ten or twenty years in the future looking back on your life now, and let's say this family member who's bothering you now has died in ten or twenty years. How are you going to feel then, looking back on the time now when you're spending so much of your time being mad at them and being nasty to them?

How are you going to feel about your behavior now? Are you going to look back from the future and say: "Wow! This person was in my life then but I never really tried to have a good relationship with them. Instead I just complained about them, criticized them, talked bad about them behind their back and yelled at them to their face or refused to talk to them at all."

So think of that person no longer being in your life. How are you going to feel about your behavior to them now? This is something important to think about, because if you do, you will make more effort now to have a good relationship with them. By doing so, you'll have much more happiness now and ten years from now, you won't have so much regret and so much of a guilty feeling for treating them badly now.

But when we just say: "Oh it's their fault! They're so mean. They're so nasty. They have to change. And after they've changed, then I'll start being nice to them." As long as you think that, who are you hurting? You're hurting yourself, aren't you? As long as you think: "It's their fault. They need to change. I'm not going to be nice to you because you're not nice to me."

We're like three-year-old's sometimes, aren't we? Especially when we're with the people we get married to or with our parents or siblings. Instead of behaving like three-year-old's, why don't we appreciate having that person in our life right now and try being nice to them? If we're nice to them, you know what? They might change how they feel towards us and they might start being nice to us.

As long as we keep saying: "You have to change first!", well, maybe they're feeling the same way, so nothing changes. Everybody remains miserable. Then when somebody dies, we're filled with guilt and remorse. It doesn't make much sense, does it? It's much better to try and improve your relationships now.

### Advice for parents

For those of you who have children, it's very important to improve your relationships with your family members, because otherwise you're teaching your children how to act towards their family members. Kids don't just listen to what their parents say. They watch what their parents do. If as a parent, you are complaining about your brothers and sisters all the time, then you are teaching your children to complain about each other when they're adults. You're telling your children to not be harmonious because you're setting that example of complaining about your siblings.

If you criticize your parents and complain about them, you're teaching your children to complain about you. And they will. If you aren't nice to your husband or your wife, if you're always fighting with your children or you're always fighting and criticizing the person you're married to, you're teaching your children to have unhappy relationships and to always quarrel with the people that they marry and the people in the family. Is this what you want to teach your children?

Really think about it, because how you act towards your husband or your wife, your parents, your children, that is exactly what you're teaching your children to do. Look at your behavior and think: "Do I want my children to act like me? Do I want my children to have the kind of relationships I have with family members?" If you don't, then you need to start changing how you treat your family members because you've got to set a better example for your kids.

Don't count on teaching your kids just with what you say. You have to teach your kids with what you do. My parents used to say: "Do what I say, not as I do." But it didn't work because we're smart when we're kids. We watch what our parents do. And often we copy our parents' bad mistakes. So if you're a parent, don't teach your kid your bad habits.

All of these kinds of problems come because of our self-centered mind, because we're just thinking *me*, and "I'm so important. Why do I have to apologize? You apologize first!" We're just thinking about ourselves, and by doing that, we actually become quite unhappy. When we open our heart and we start looking at other people and cherishing others and taking care of them, then our own mind becomes much more relaxed. Much more peaceful.

### What does it mean to cherish others?

And when I talk about cherishing others, I don't mean worrying about them. I'm not talking about being a parent who minds the business of their children. That's not what is meant by taking care of your kids or cherishing your kids. That's being a busy-body. Worrying about your kids: "Are they doing this? Are they doing that? Oh I'm so worried! How are they doing in their exams?" – that's not cherishing your kids. That's driving them crazy!

Think about it. Didn't it drive you nuts when your parents worried about you? Didn't you just want to tell them: "Mum, dad, leave me alone! Relax!"?

They were always there going: "Oh, did you eat enough? Did you sleep enough? Did you study enough? No you didn't study enough. Sit down and study more!" [laughter]

That's not helping your kids. We really have to understand what cherishing people means. It doesn't mean worrying about them, harping on them or becoming a drill sergeant.

Sometimes I watch the behavior of parents and I think the parents must have trained in the army because all they do is shout orders to their kids: "Come on, time to get up!"

You feel like you're in the army. "Why are you sleeping? You're sleeping too late – get up! Wash your face. Time for breakfast. Sit down. Stop playing with your food. Eat your food! Time to go to school. Get up. Come on, you're late!" [laughter] Really, it sounds like the drill sergeant in the army.

I think it would be very interesting for those parents to have a little notebook and make a note every time they give an order to their child or when they say a whole sentence to their child, and see which they say more of.

Do you give them orders or do you actually talk to them? Do you ever ask your child at the end of the day: "How was your day? What did you learn?" Or are you sitting there ordering: "Oh, you got home from school. Why are you late? You're ten minutes late. Were you playing? Sit down and study. Right now. No, you cannot watch TV. Study now! Stop looking around in space. Study!"

Command after command after command. How does your child feel? Poor kids! What about asking your kid: "How was your day? How are your friends? What did you learn today?"

Talk to your child. Get to know what your child thinks. If you're more relaxed, your kid might be more relaxed and they might study better. Try talking to your children instead of just ordering them around.

You see, what I'm getting at is we have to really think what cherishing somebody else means and what caring for somebody else means. Think about it. Do you want your children to do well in the exams or do you want them to be happy?

Which is more important? If they're happy, does it mean they're going to do badly in their exams? No, they might actually do better in their exams if they're happy. Therefore think: how can I create a happy family? How can my behavior change to create more happiness in my family and in my workplace? Think about it and try caring about the other people and see what happens. See if things change when you do.

This self-centered attitude that keeps us bound in all these problems – this is the mind that we're trying to subdue. This is the mind that we're trying to eliminate so that we can have happiness now and so that we can progress along the path to Enlightenment.

## Chapter Two: The Disclosure of Wrongdoing

Chapter Two, which is the chapter we're on now, is called the Disclosure of Wrongdoing. We're talking about the wrongdoings that we have engaged in due to our self-centered attitude and we're generating some regret for them. In this Chapter, we're also trying to accumulate a lot of positive potential by being generous and making offerings to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.

So let's continue with the text.

### Chapter 2 Verse 7

*7. Devoid of merit and destitute, I have nothing else to offer. Therefore, may the Protectors, whose concerns are for the welfare of others, accept this by their own power for my sake.*

When we say 'Devoid of merit and destitute,' what we mean is that we might have a lot of wealth in our life but we don't have a lot of merit. We don't have a lot of positive potential because we've spent a large part of our life being very selfish and self-centered.

So therefore the 'Protectors', meaning the Buddhas and bodhisattvas, 'whose concerns are for the welfare of others, accept this by their own power for my sake.' What we're saying here is that we see that we need to be more generous and request that others may accept our offerings and give us the opportunity to be generous.

## Chapter 2 Verse 8

*8. I completely offer my entire self to the Jinas and their Children. O Supreme Beings, accept me! I reverently devote myself to your service.*

'The Jinas' means the Conquerors, in other words the Buddhas because they have conquered their mental afflictions. 'Their children' refers to the bodhisattvas.

Here we are offering our bodies to the Buddhas and bodhisattvas and asking them to accept us so that we may serve them. What does this mean?

Right now, we have offered our lives and our body to our self-centered mind. Right now, our self-centered mind is the commander and we bow to it and we do everything our selfish mind tells us to do. That just leads us to so much confusion and unhappiness.

Instead of that, if we devote our body and offer ourselves to our spiritual mentors, to the Buddhas and to the bodhisattvas, then we will actively engage in doing what is their priority. Their priority is the welfare of all beings, so when we offer ourselves to the service of the Buddhas, we will be engaged in actions that are for the welfare of others. When we do that, we begin to subdue our own self-centered attitude.

Do you get what I'm saying? When we become the servant of our self-centered attitude, we're miserable. But when we offer ourselves as a servant to our spiritual teachers, Buddhas and bodhisattvas – those who are engaged in virtue – then all the work we do in the process of serving them will be virtuous actions done for the welfare of others and we create a great deal of merit and positive potential.

Plus, we are actively doing things that are beneficial to other beings, so we create more happiness in the world. When we do actions that benefit others and other beings are happier, then we're going to have less problems, because instead of living with unhappy people, we're going to live in a society full of people who are more content and happier.

Do you get what I'm saying? When we offer ourselves to serve the Buddhas and bodhisattvas, what we're basically saying is we're offering ourselves to do positive actions, to create virtue and positive potential. We're offering ourselves with the intention to try hard to generate love and compassion for all beings and do our actions motivated by that kind of love and compassion. When we do that, then we create the causes of happiness, not the causes of suffering.

## Chapter 2 Verse 9

*9. Being free from fear of mundane existence due to your protection, I shall serve sentient beings; I shall completely transcend my earlier vices, and henceforth I shall not commit negativities anymore.*

When it says 'being free from fear of mundane existence due to your protection', it doesn't mean that the Buddhas are going to stop other people from harming us. The Buddhas can't control other people. But the Buddhas can protect us by teaching us the Dharma. Being under the protection of the Buddha means that from our side, we are having an open mind and we are listening to the Dharma teachings, and we're going to take them to heart and we're going to try and practice them.

If we do that, then every year when I come, you're not going to have the same problem to tell me because you'll have practiced the Dharma. By practicing the Dharma, your problem will have changed. That's how the Dharma acts as our protector – by giving us the tools to change our lives.

The verse goes on to say 'I shall serve sentient beings; I shall completely transcend my earlier vices'. Examples of vices are our self-centeredness and all the things that we've done motivated by our selfishness. If you think about it, all the negative karma we've ever created are done under the influence of self-centeredness. In the karma chapter of the 'Gradual Path to Enlightenment', you will find the ten destructive actions that the Buddha described. These are described in the Pali sutras as well. If we examine, we will find that we are always under the influence of our own self-centeredness when we do these actions.

Take killing. Whenever we kill any living being, we're caring more for ourselves than for them, aren't we? Whenever we take something that hasn't been given to us, it's because our self-centered mind wants it. Whenever we have extra-marital affairs or use our sexuality unwisely or unkindly, again it's because of our selfish mind just thinking about our own pleasure.

Whenever we lie, it's because of the selfish mind, isn't it? How about when we talk behind people's back and create disharmony? Are we doing that out of love and compassion or are we doing that out of self-centeredness? Self-centeredness. Whenever we create negative karma by speaking harsh words, we are also under the influence of self-centeredness. Whenever we waste time in idle talk and gossip, it is also due to the influence of self-preoccupation.

Whenever we're involved in coveting, ill will or wrong views, we're always under the influence of the self-centered mind. We will never do any of these actions when we're concerned about others, will we?

When we cultivate love and compassion, do we talk bad about somebody behind their back? No. When we cultivate patience and tolerance and acceptance, do we get angry and insult people? No.

By offering ourselves to the Buddhas and offering service to them, what we're saying is: "I want to act with love and compassion towards others and not let my self-centered attitude run the show." We're saying: "I shall transcend my earlier vices." By practicing love and compassion, we're going to be able to overcome all our bad habits.

### About the word 'sin'

The verse continues with: 'henceforth I shall sin no more.' I have to talk about this word 'sin'. Alan and Vesna (the translators of this text) made a big footnote explaining why they use the word 'sin'. However, I disagree with them.

I don't like the word 'sin' at all. I don't feel that it describes the meaning of the Buddhist word. 'Sin' is a word that is used very often in Christianity and has a very negative connotation. I don't want to bring that word into Buddhism because the word used in Christianity or in other religions definitely doesn't have the same connotation as that of the Buddhist word.

I notice that in the later verses, there is mention of 'I, the sinner', but actually in Buddhism, the concept is very different.

In a religion like Christianity, it's said that people are born with original sin. It's kind of like we are defective from the beginning.

Whereas from a Buddhist perspective, the very nature of our mind is something pure. We are not defective from the beginning. We have the Buddha nature. We have the Buddha potential.

It's clouded now by our negativities. It's clouded by our negative karma. We need to clear these clouds away from our mindstream. But our mind itself is pure. That's something very important to remember and that's one of the reasons why I think instead of 'sin', it's more accurate to say 'negativity'. We do negative actions. We commit negativities. But we are not negative people. We are not sinners.

### Differentiate between the person and the action

I think it is very important to make this distinction because in Buddhism we differentiate between the person and the action. A person may do negative actions but that person is never an evil person. How can somebody who has the Buddha potential be an evil person? It's impossible. Somebody who has the nature of the Buddhas, who has the potential to become a fully Enlightened being cannot be an inherently evil person.

A person may be confused temporarily and their actions may be negative, but the person is never negative. This is very important to understand because what it means is we can never write off somebody. We can never say: "Oh that person is so negative – just kill him! Get rid of him!"

We can never ever do that, because that person has the Buddha nature. Even Adolf Hitler, Mao Tse Tung, Joseph Stalin, people who have killed millions of human beings – they still have the Buddha nature. We cannot say they are evil people. They did many, many mistakes and negative actions. They're going to reap the karmic effect of their horrendous actions, but they are not evil people. This is very important to remember.

So whenever you're mad at somebody and you give them a label, realize that your label is not correct, because you have to separate the person from the action. The action can be bad, but the person is not bad. Whenever we swear or call people names, whenever we say somebody is a jerk or they are an idiot, whenever we give people these kinds of labels, we have to realize that it's wrong to do that. A person is not an idiot. A person is not a jerk. They may have done mistaken actions, but they are not a bad person. They are not an evil person. Every single person has the possibility to purify their negative actions.

Yesterday I was talking about my work with inmates, with prisoners, and this is one of the things that I really see with the inmates: that they are not evil people. They may have done negative actions but they are not evil people. Everybody can change. Everybody has that potential to change because you know what? As soon as we say that somebody else can never change because they are inherently evil, then that means the same thing applies to us.

How are we ever to get enlightened if we think we're inherently defective? If we have that negative view of ourselves: "Oh, I've committed so much negative karma; I'm such a horrible person!" If we think that way about ourselves, then we won't exert any energy to practice the path, and if we don't practice the path, we're never going to progress towards Enlightenment. So that self-image that says: "I'm a horrible person!" is our real enemy because we are not horrible people. We may have made mistakes in our life but we are not horrible people.

So we have to forgive ourselves and we have to forgive other people. Don't form an image of any person – yourself or others – saying: "Oh, they're just like this. That's the way it is!" Because that's not true. Even the Buddha was once a samsaric being like us. Even the Buddha was once a confused, miserable sentient being like us. The Buddha did the same negative actions that we did before he became a Buddha, but the thing was he realized his mistakes and he changed.

Same with Kuan Yin. Before she became a bodhisattva, a Buddha, she was an ordinary person like us, making many mistakes. But she realized it and started practicing the Dharma instead. She stopped her negative actions and transformed her mind. If people like Kuan Yin and the

Buddha can change, then certainly we can. If they once started off like us and changed, then we can also change.

It's important to have that kind of confidence in ourselves and other people so that we do see that people can change. Sometimes it takes a lot of effort to change, but hey, we make a lot of effort for worldly activities, don't we? We should at least make some effort for Dharma activities because they bring good results.

### Offering a bathing house to the Buddhas and bodhisattvas

From Verse 10, we're going back to making offerings and here we're specifically offering a bathing house to the Buddhas and bodhisattvas.

There's a lot of symbology about offering the Buddha a bath. We're not just turning on the hot water and giving him some Pamolive Soap. In this kind of offering where we offer a bath, the Buddha represents our own Buddha nature. When we offer a bath to the Buddha, it's symbolizing cleansing our own Buddha nature from our ignorance, anger and clinging attachment. It's symbolizing cleansing our Buddha nature from the negative karma of our mistaken actions.

Although we're visualizing this very beautiful scene of offering a bath to the Buddha, think of the symbolic meaning of cleansing the nature of our own mind. It's quite a beautiful visualization.

### Chapter 2 Verses 10-13

*10. In sweetly fragrant bathing chambers whose beautiful pillars are radiant with jewels, glowing canopies made of pearls, and crystal floors transparent and sparkling,*

*11. I bathe the Tathagatas and their Children with many vases studded with superb jewels and filled with pleasing, fragrant flowers and water, to the accompaniment of songs and instrumental music.*

*12. I dry their bodies with scented, immaculate, exquisite cloths; then I offer them beautifully colored and sweetly fragrant garments.*

*13. I adorn Samantabhadra, Ajita, Manjughosa, Lokeshvara, and others with those divine, soft, delicate, and colorful raiments and with the most precious of jewels.*

'Their Children' refers to the bodhisattvas. When we read the 'King of Prayers, the Extraordinary Aspiration of Samantabhadra', we get an idea of how this bodhisattva thinks. 'Ajita' refers to Maitreya, the next Buddha. 'Manjughosa' is Manjushri. 'Lokeshvara' is Kuan Yin. We're offering a bath to all these bodhisattvas and all the other bodhisattvas as well.

### Chapter 2 Verses 14-19

*14. With perfumes permeating a thousand million worlds, I anoint the bodies of the Lords of Sages that are blazing with the luster of well-refined, rubbed, and polished gold.*

*15. I worship the most glorious Lords of Sages with all wonderfully fragrant and pleasing blossoms—mandarava flowers, blue lotuses, and others—and with splendidly arranged garlands.*

*16. I perfume them with enchanting clouds of incenses having a pungent and pervasive aroma. I offer them feasts consisting of various foods and drinks.*

*17. I offer them jeweled lamps, mounted in rows on golden lotuses; and I scatter lovely drifts of blossoms on the floor anointed with perfume.*

*18. To those filled with love I also offer brilliant multitudes of palaces, delightful with songs of praise, radiant with garlands of pearls and jewels, and ornamented at the entrances in four directions.*

*19. I bring to mind the great sages' exquisitely beautiful, jeweled parasols perfectly raised with golden handles, lovely shapes, and inlaid pearls.*

When you're reading these and thinking about these images, doesn't it make your mind happy? When you think of all these beautiful things and then imagine offering them to the Buddhas, doesn't it make your mind happy? Instead of thinking about your problems all day which makes your mind unhappy, you think about all the beautiful things and offer them.

There's something quite powerful in this kind of meditation and there's something quite transformative because very often in our life, whenever we think of beautiful things, who do we offer them to? We offer them to ourselves, don't we?

"Oh, there's some good food; I'm going to buy it and eat it."

We're walking past a store: "Oh, what beautiful clothes! I think they'll fit me. I'm going to buy them."

"Oh, a nice bathtub. I'm going to take a bath."

"Oh, some entertainment – music or TV or movie. I'm going to go see them."

Do you see how in our ordinary life whenever we see something that's attractive, we offer it to ourselves? We're very self-centered, aren't we? Anything good, we want it for ourselves. Anything that's problematic, we give it to others. So we do practice 'generosity': "You can have all the problems!"

"I'm giving you the opportunity to take out the garbage."

"I'm giving you the opportunity to clean the house."

So we give people all these opportunities. We're so 'generous', aren't we?

"I give you the opportunity to do the laundry."

"I give you the opportunity to work overtime."

But to ourselves, to our self-centered mind, we give all the nice things. Nice food – "May I have it." Nice, comfortable bed – "May I have it." Nice beautiful house – "I'll take it!" Car – "Oh, I want that. It's suited for me." Good vacation – "Very good, I'll take that one too." Problems – "You can have them!"

In the meditation here, what Shantideva's describing completely changes that process. We're imagining beautiful things and offering them to the Buddhas and bodhisattvas. In the process of doing that, we rejoice and we feel good. We're thinking of beauty and we offer the beauty. We realize that we don't have to possess something in order to enjoy it.

## To enjoy something, we don't have to possess it

Let me pause here for a minute and tell you the story of one of the inmates whom I've worked with. I have known this inmate since 1999. He was serving a 20-year sentence in the US for being a drug dealer.

He was a millionaire, having gotten the money through selling drugs. His family was poor so he wanted to make a lot of money. Through selling drugs, he made a lot of money. He had several houses. I think he told me he had eleven cars. He was very, very rich. He was partying and enjoying the high life.

Then he got arrested and was sentenced to twenty years in prison. He changed a lot while he was in prison. He began to realize that selling drugs was not a good career. It was true that he had a good business mind, but selling drugs was not the way to use his business talent.

He began to think about his life, having so many cars and going to parties all the time. He realized that superficially, it looked like he was having a good time and it looked like he had many friends. But actually, none of those friends were very good friends because as soon as he got arrested, they were nowhere to be seen. They vanished.

When you serve such a long prison sentence, very often you dream about the day you're going to get out of prison and you dream about what you're going to do when you get out and what you want to buy and what you want to have and where you want to go and things like that, because somehow thinking about that enables you to get through the very dreary days in the dangerous environment of the US prison.

So this is how he completed his sentence. He has been out now for not quite a year. I talked to him before I came to Singapore. I saw him after he got out when the Dalai Lama was teaching in Los Angeles. He came to the Dalai Lama's teachings. I was very happy with that. He's now working in the construction industry, helping to build things and so on. He doesn't have a lot of money now. That day when I met him, he related the following incident to me.

Some rich person was building a huge house, and he was working at that person's house one day. During lunch, he sat out on the balcony of the house that had this incredibly beautiful view. He was sitting there eating his sandwich and enjoying the view. At that moment he said he really saw that he didn't need to own such a big house in order to enjoy it. He saw that you don't need to possess things in order to enjoy them.

I was thinking about it because you know, I bet in some ways, he had more happiness sitting on the patio of that house looking at the view than the owner of the house had. I bet you the owner of the house is so busy making money that they hardly have any time to stay at home and enjoy their beautiful house.

And I bet you when the owner is home, all they do is worry about all the things in the house that have broken: "Oh, I don't like the color of this wall. I want it painted differently." Whereas my friend – not being the owner of the house – could go there and enjoy it, finish the job, leave there, never be at the house again, but having peace in his own heart.

I think having that kind of peace and contentment in our own heart comes much more from our attitude than it does from actually owning things. Just look in your own life if all the things you own really give you pleasure or give you more things to take care of and more things to worry about.

In this meditation practice of making offerings to the Buddhas, we're enjoying all the beautiful things and offering them. We're imagining all the Buddhas and bodhisattvas being pleased by our offerings. We're taking delight in being generous and our own mind is happy. We're creating positive potential through our practice of generosity.

## Chapter 2 Verses 20-21

*20. Thereafter, may delightful clouds of offerings rise high, and clouds of instrumental music that enrapture all sentient beings.*

*21. May showers of flowers, jewels, and the like continually fall on the images, reliquaries, and all the jewels of the sublime Dharma.*

We're offering to the stupas, to all the images of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas and to 'the sublime Dharma', to all the scriptures, to all the teachings.

## Chapter 2 Verses 22

*22. Just as Manjughosa and others worship the Jinas, so do I worship the Tathagatas, the Protectors, together with their Children.*

'Others' refers to the other bodhisattvas. Even the bodhisattvas would make offerings to the Buddhas and to other bodhisattvas. When you read the 'King of Prayers: the Extraordinary Aspiration of the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra', Samantabhadra is also making offerings to all the Buddhas and bodhisattvas.

So it's not like the bodhisattvas are just hanging out waiting for people to offer them some apples and oranges. The bodhisattvas want to create a vast wealth of positive potential, so the high level bodhisattvas emanate many bodies and they go to many pure lands of many Buddhas and make offerings there to all the Buddhas. This is the kind of practice that we're getting introduced to here.

## Chapter 2 Verses 23

*23. With hymns that are seas of melodies, I praise the Oceans of Virtues. May the clouds of harmonies of praise ascend to them in the same way.*

Here, we're offering music and we're offering praise. Offering praise to the Buddhas and bodhisattvas – this is really a transformation for us, because who do we usually offer praise to? Ourselves, don't we? What do we do? We tell people all of our good qualities.

We go for a job interview. You would think we were the Buddha when we go for a job interview – we have so many talents. We just make up these talents, make up these skills. When we meet somebody and we want them to like us, then we present ourselves so well – so many talents, and we praise ourselves. When we write out our business cards, we put all these titles after our name so that other people will know how important we are. We love to be praised.

But here, we're transforming all of that. We're giving up the wish for praise and instead, we're looking at the Buddhas and bodhisattvas who are the beings who actually have wonderful qualities and are worthy of praise and we're praising them. We are feeling happy about praising them.

The thing is that the more we can see the good qualities in others, the more we make ourselves receptive to generating those same good qualities ourselves. Whereas the more we criticize others, the more we develop the negative qualities of criticizing, back-biting, gossiping, speaking harshly and rudely ourselves.

When we criticize others, we're harming ourselves. When we praise those who are worthy of praise, we're benefiting ourselves. This is completely the opposite way to how ego usually thinks. Ego usually thinks: praise – "Send it this way. Me – I'll take all the praise." Criticism –

"We already know it's your fault. The criticism goes to you." That's just our usual silly way of thinking. Here we're working to transform it.

## Questions and Answers

**[Audience:] If the world should come to an end, does it mean there is no more chance to be reborn as a human in our next life?**

[Ven. Chodron:] Our Planet Earth is just one tiny little piece in the whole wide universe. There're many other human realms in different places in the universe. Since everything is impermanent, one day this planet will end. Even when that happens, we will still be able to have precious human lives in other planets, in other places.

Speaking about the world and taking care of the world... I very seldom go to the movies. I basically only go to documentaries. Recently somebody offered to take the Abbey residents to see the movie called "An Inconvenient Truth". It's a film by Al Gore. He was the one who won the US election the first time when he was running against George Bush, but because of the American policy, Bush got the Presidency because he had the electoral votes.

Anyway, Al Gore has been very interested in ecology and in preserving the environment. He made this movie, a documentary called "An Inconvenient Truth". I encourage you to see it because it talks about global warming. It talks about the danger to our planet that we human beings are contributing to through the way we use materials, through the burning of fossil fuels, through not recycling.

We're actually endangering our own lives here because we're changing the climate through so many things that we're doing. When the climate changes, everything is going to change. Especially being in Singapore, you should be concerned about this. You're an island surrounded by water. If the glaciers and the ice packs at the North Pole and South Pole melt, the oceans are going to rise. What's going to happen to Singapore?

This documentary is very well done and it's showing us a lot of things that we can do to take care of the environment. I believe this is a very important issue for us as a Buddhist community. We talk about love and compassion. We have to put our love and compassion into practical action and take care of our planet. If we misuse our environment, what kind of planet are we leaving for the children and grandchildren in future generations?

If we say that we cherish sentient beings, then we need to cherish the environment that we all live in. You'll notice that every time I come to Singapore, I always encourage people to recycle. Whenever I'm at places, I'll save my little yogurt cartons. I'll save my paper. And I'll ask the Singaporeans I'm with: "Where do I recycle them?" They all look at me and go: "Oh, just put them in the garbage."

If we continue doing this, what's going to happen to the world's resources and how is this contributing to global warming and climatic change? What are we leaving for future generations if we don't recycle the resources that we enjoy? It's very, very important.

Many people may think: "In a hundred years when we have those problems, I won't be here." Well, what about if you have a precious human life back on this planet? You might be here! And even if you aren't here, future generations will be. So we need to take care of our environment and I encourage you to.

You know what? I bet you can make money doing it. Now everybody's interested. I said the word 'money', everybody is very excited. Make money! I bet there's a lot of new industries that can begin through recycling and through thinking of how to use the world's resources in a better way.

So I really encourage the Buddhist community to... we have an expression 'to walk your talk'. We talk about love and compassion; we should walk it.

I think Buddhist temples should take the lead. Wouldn't that be incredible? What an incredible contribution if Buddhist temples took the lead and instead of throwing away so much styrofoam and so much plastic, started recycling or washing things. This would be an incredible contribution.

**[Audience:] How do we see emptiness in daily situations?**

[Ven. Chodron:] If you want to see the nature of reality in daily situations, be aware of how things arise dependently. The more we are aware of dependent arising, the more we'll understand that things are empty of independent existence.

If we look at this building that we're in and realize that it arose dependent on its parts, dependent on its causes, dependent on our mind labeling it 'Tai Pei Buddhist Center', if we see things as dependent, then we can see that they lack their own intrinsic nature. They depend on causes, on parts, and on the mind that conceives and labels them. As you are going through your daily life, look at things in this way. Train your mind to see things in this way.

Another way to think about emptiness in your daily life is when you are upset, stop and ask yourself: "Who's upset?"

Your mind will say: "*I'm* upset!"

Then you say: "Who's upset?"

*"I'm* upset!"

Well, wait a minute. Who's upset? Who is this 'I' who is upset? Really. Who is it? Look for that 'I' that's upset. See if you can isolate something that is inherently you that is upset. If you can't find it, then stop being upset, because there's no solid person there to be upset.

**[Audience:] Will sterilization of animals create unwholesome karma?**

[Ven. Chodron:] I think it depends on the reason why you are sterilizing the animals and what your motivation is. If there are let's say, in the neighborhood, too many dogs and too many cats and you need to control their number in the neighborhood to prevent an over-population for the sake of the animals, and so you take them to be sterilized, then I think you are doing it with a reasonable motivation. You are trying to benefit others and this is very different from just sterilizing for the sake of doing it.

**[Audience:] We all know that His Holiness the Dalai Lama is an enlightened master. How come he still cannot give up the attachment of wanting Tibet to be free and independent?**

[Ven. Chodron:] How do you know that the Dalai Lama is experiencing attachment and that attachment is his motivation for wanting Tibet to be free? Do you think maybe he has compassion for the Tibetans and for the Chinese, that he wants the whole area to live in peace and harmony, and that he sees that a free Tibet could contribute to that and to the existence of the Buddha Dharma?

You know, every time we want something, it doesn't mean we are attached to it. Sometimes people have this misconception. It comes because often we mis-translate a Buddhist term. There's one word that we sometimes translate as 'desire' and sometimes as 'attachment'. There's confusion if we translate it as 'desire', because in English, the word 'desire' can mean good desires or non-productive desires.

When we're attached to something, when we're clinging to something out of self-centeredness, that's the kind of attachment that causes difficulties that we want to give up.

But when we desire something wholesome, when we desire to practice the Dharma, when we desire for sentient beings to be happy, when we desire for people to be free and to live in peace, those kinds of desires are not necessarily attachment. They could be desires that we have because of genuine love and compassion for people.

Now if we go about killing others in order to gain freedom, then maybe our wish for freedom has attachment because I don't think killing others in the name of freedom is very wise. But the Tibetans and in particular, the Dalai Lama are advocating non-violence and nobody is getting hurt in their wish to be free.

So don't think that every time there is a wish for something or a desire, that it means that there is attachment. Otherwise people generate the wrong idea that Buddhists are just like bumps on a log, that you don't have any ambition, that you just sit there and go: "I have no attachment, it's all okay!"

That's not true at all! Bodhisattvas have no attachment but they have a lot of compassion and they have a deep motivation to benefit others, so bodhisattvas are very busy people. They're not just sitting there spacing out; they're working for the benefit of sentient beings. They have lots to do!

I might say, because I don't know if I will get through all of these questions, that if you read 'Buddhism for Beginners' or any of my other books, you might also find answers to your questions.

**[Audience:] How can I advise or help a relative to lessen her negative karma of having done two abortions?**

[Ven. Chodron:] You have to be very tactful and very careful in this kind of situation and wait until the person is ready to hear it. Chances are they feel very bad about having an abortion themselves. I think most people, in the case of unwanted pregnancy, would prefer not to have an abortion, but they have abortions due to the circumstances. It isn't active killing. Purification definitely needs to be done.

But I think it's good in society if we can find other ways to handle cases where there's unwanted pregnancy, for example, encouraging people to have the children and to give them up for adoption. My younger sister is adopted. I'm always very glad that her birth-mother had her so that my family was able to adopt her, because I had always wanted a sister. I just had a brother. So now I have a brother and a sister.

I think there are alternatives to abortion. If society were to encourage these alternatives, then people would not feel in such dire straits when there was an unwanted pregnancy.

I think it is also important to encourage birth control. I think when people are sexually active, they have to be sexually responsible. If you don't want children, then you have to use birth control. If you don't use birth control, then be prepared to have a kid, because that's what happens!

**[Audience:] Can mentally ill people have a healthy mind in their next life?**

[Ven. Chodron:] Sure! In the next life, different karma could ripen and they could be free of mental illness.

**[Audience:] Can people with mental illness, in particular depression or having panic attacks, practice meditation?**

[Ven. Chodron:] I think it depends on the individual and it depends on their Dharma teacher. I think it is suitable for people who have some mental health concerns to practice meditation under the guidance of a teacher. A person with that kind of difficulty should be under the guidance of a good spiritual teacher and they should follow their teacher's instructions. If they don't want to do meditation, they can also do other spiritual practices like bowing or making offerings or chanting. Things like these can be very good for purifying negative karma as well.

Every winter at Sravasti Abbey, we close the Abbey to visitors and we have a 3-month meditation retreat. There was a man who came last year for the retreat and he had panic attacks. I didn't know about this before he came to the retreat. I only found out about it during the retreat when he started talking about having panic attacks.

But it was very interesting, because through the retreat, he learnt to watch his mind and he began to see how what he was thinking contributed to the panic attacks. By the end of the retreat, when he felt a panic attack coming, instead of having certain thoughts, he would let go of those thoughts and switch his mind to taking refuge or thinking about love and compassion. He began to realize that he could control the panic attacks by not letting his mind follow the same old thoughts.

Similarly with depression. Meditation can also help, because sometimes the meditation helps them see that their own thoughts are part of the cause of the depression. They learn to let go of certain thoughts and not hang on to them. When they do that, then the depression can also cease. So it's good to be always in consultation with a qualified spiritual mentor if you have a history of mental difficulties.

**[Audience:] If I continue to avoid creating negative karma, create a lot of positive karma, and practice metta meditation in this life, will I be born without any mental illness in my next life so that I can practice meditation and gain Enlightenment?**

[Ven. Chodron:] Why not, if you create a lot of positive potential. And I think especially doing metta meditation is very wonderful and very soothing for the mind. Metta meditation is meditation on love and compassion.

There are people who request the Abbey residents to do prayers for them. In return we ask them to contemplate the Four Immeasurables. By doing this, they create a lot of good karma and yes, it definitely creates the cause to be free of mental difficulties and mental illness in future lives.

**[Audience:] Some of the inmates you were working with committed the act of killing. What is the karmic effect of killing?**

[Ven. Chodron:] Well, horrible karma. Killing other living beings creates the cause to be reborn in the hell realms and even if we are born as human beings, we will have a lot of illness, or we will be living in a place where there is war, or we have a short life. Some of the inmates whom I have worked with have created this karma, but some of them are also very earnestly practicing to purify their karma.

Remember I was mentioning that the Abbey has three months of meditation every winter? Well, we tell people – the inmates and also other people like you – that they can do the retreat from afar by doing one session of the practice everyday during the time that all of us at the Abbey are in retreat. The retreatants at the Abbey are doing six sessions a day. The people who are not at the Abbey do one session a day, but in that way they are participating in the retreat and they feel the support of the people at the Abbey. They also feel involved in supporting the people at the Abbey.

In the last two years when the Abbey has done that, we have had many inmates participating in the retreat from afar. Last year when we did the Vajrasattva retreat which is especially for purifying negative karma, we had over seventy people worldwide participating in the retreat from afar by doing at least one meditation session at home, and twenty of those seventy people were inmates.

The inmates would write to us and tell us how their meditation sessions were going, and it was wonderful because it stopped the people at the Abbey from complaining.

Sometimes when you are on retreat, you get so sensitive and you go: "Oh this person in the retreat hall, when they move their prayer beads, they make too much noise and it's disturbing me!" They complain about all sorts of silly things.

Well, we would get the letters from the inmates and they would be saying: "I'm in a dorm room with 300 other men and I'm doing my meditation on the top bunk and there's a light bulb three feet away from my head." All of a sudden, people at the Abbey would go: "Wow! Do we have good conditions for doing retreat!" Here's somebody trying to do their retreat in a room with 300 other people talking, screaming, singing, and yet the inmates put out incredible effort to do their practice. Prison is not a quiet environment. It's very noisy. And they would do their practice no matter how much noise there was. It's incredible!

So the people at the Abbey found it very inspiring to receive the letters from the inmates and also from the other people who did the retreat from afar. It was very encouraging for everybody.

**[Audience:] You mentioned that we are fortunate to be born in a land of plenty while our fellow human beings are suffering in Africa. Shouldn't they be happy to suffer because without the ripening of the seeds of negative karma, there will be no bliss? Right?**

[Ven. Chodron:] Wrong! This is the way we think when we experience suffering. When we experience suffering, we say: "It's the ripening of our negative karma and I'm very happy that negative karma is ripening because now I'm finishing with it." But when we see other people suffering, we don't say: "You should be happy to suffer because your negative karma is ripening. And you know what? I'll cause you a little bit of extra suffering to purify your negative karma."

That is not the way to think! When other people are suffering, we react with compassion. When we have problems, we rejoice that our negative karma is ripening.

**[Audience:] Are the viruses that bring the bird flu sentient beings?**

[Ven. Chodron:] Usually viruses are not considered sentient beings.

**[Audience:] What is the karma of killing the birds? Do we have to face the consequences?**

[Ven. Chodron:] Yes. If we take the lives of others, then we have to face the consequences of doing that. If you're ever in a situation where killing is going on, try not to do it. Try not to support it. If you can't do that, then at least regret it.