

Commentary on
Shantideva's "A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life"
Chapter 2: Disclosure of Wrongdoing - Part 3 of 4
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What is it that wastes our life?

When we were setting a positive motivation for listening to the teaching just now, I was talking about the preciousness of this human life and how important it is to use our time in a wise way and not to waste our life.

What is it that wastes our life? How can we avoid wasting our life? At the beginning of the last two evenings, I've been talking about the disadvantages of the self-centered mind. In fact, it's this self-centered mind that wastes our life. It's our self-centered mind, our selfish mind that's thinking '*Me!*', '*I want!*', '*I need!*', '*I have to have!*', '*I should have!*', '*The world owes me!*' It's the kind of mind that is very focused around ourselves and as a result becomes very attached to the sensual pleasures of this life.

Self-centeredness and attachment to sensual pleasures

We become very attached to nice sounds, smells, tastes, touches and sights. We always want to have very nice sensual experiences. We're also very attached to our reputation, aren't we? We want a whole group of people to know how wonderful we are and not say or think anything bad about us. We're also very attached to people's praise and approval, to other people telling us that we're good and that what we're doing is good. And lastly, we're very attached to... starts with an 'm'... what is it? Money! Aren't we attached to money and possessions?

With this kind of attachment that's a very self-centered mind wanting all of these things for *me*, we spend our whole life running around struggling for happiness. Happiness becomes a big struggle, because we're always on the lookout – how can I have the most pleasure? That mind that is struggling for happiness and on the lookout for the most pleasure becomes very confused, and it can't make a decision.

Attachment to sensual pleasures and indecisiveness

Do some of you suffer from indecisiveness? You can't make a decision: "Should I do this? Should I do that? Maybe I should do this other thing."

What is it that causes this indecisiveness? It's the mind that's very attached to the pleasures of this life, because we're trying to get the most pleasure out of every small thing that we do.

When it comes time to eat a meal, we sit there and we go: "What should I eat?" You go to the hawker center or to the restaurant and you wonder: "What should I eat? Shall I have rice? Shall I have noodles? Shall I have this dish? Shall I have that dish? Maybe I should have this other one."

Not long ago some people invited me for a meal. They spent forty-five minutes talking about what to eat. Forty-five minutes! Now of course when you get the food, you eat it in less than forty-five minutes, don't you? And while you're eating it, you're talking, so you're barely even tasting it. But they had to take forty-five minutes to get exactly what they felt like eating and they enjoyed the conversation immensely. I thought it was very boring, to tell you the truth. "Shall we have broccoli? Shall we have salad? Shall we have rice or noodles?" I find that kind of conversation very boring. But these people thought it was extremely fascinating.

So we go through this kind of indecisiveness about what to eat because we're so attached to finding pleasure.

The criteria for making a decision

What are the criteria that I use for making a decision? It's not: how can I get the most pleasure? One of the criteria I use is: which decision will help me create the most positive potential and enable me to keep my

precepts best?

Can you imagine using that as a criterion for making a decision? When you need to decide where you should go or what you should do, you ask: "Well, which situation will allow me to live in ethical conduct better?"

Do you ever think about that before making a decision? Or is your criteria: how can I have the most pleasure? How can I get my way?

Another criterion I use for making a decision is: which alternative is going to be of the most benefit for sentient beings? Which option will help me cultivate the bodhicitta and attain Enlightenment for the benefit of sentient beings?

Those are the two criteria that I use and I choose my options according to them. Why? Because whatever little pleasure I get in this life is nice, but it's here and it's gone, so it's not worth worrying about so much. It's not worth spending so much time trying to think how am I going to get the most pleasure, because whatever pleasure we have is here one moment and in the next moment, it's gone, isn't it?

You ate dinner. Where's the pleasure from eating dinner? Does it still exist right now? No, it's gone! It's finished! Is it ever going to come back? No! [Audience: It's like a dream.] Yes, it's very much like a dream.

What I'm getting at is, we run around looking for these pleasures but they're here and they're gone. What we have left is the accumulation of the karma that we created by trying to get all of these pleasures.

For example when we are very attached to having a good reputation and we are averse to having a bad reputation, we'll do all sorts of negative things, won't we?

To get a good reputation, what do we do? We put on a nice face, don't we? We look all sweet and smiley. We say all sorts of wonderful things to other people that we don't mean at all, don't we? We want them to think nice about us, so we say all these nice things. We want a good reputation. "Oh, you're so wonderful. You're so good. You're so this and that." But behind their back, we go: "You see that person – he's so terrible!"

We're very two-faced, aren't we? To get a good reputation, we're not acting sincerely at all. Instead we say what we think other people want to hear to their face, and behind their back, we complain about them: "They're so terrible. I don't like them." We try and give them a bad reputation thinking that then we'll have a good one. But when we trash somebody else and criticize them behind their back, do we get a good reputation?

Think about it. When you listen to a person criticizing another behind their back, do you think well of the person who's doing the criticizing? Do you? Think about it, because what I think is, if somebody is criticizing another person behind their back and telling me all the nasty things they do, then I think: "Oh, I'd better be careful, because this person is going to go criticize me behind my back."

It's true, isn't it? When somebody has the habit of criticizing other people behind their back, it is very difficult for us to trust them, because if they criticize others, they're going to criticize us too.

What about if it's us criticizing other people behind their back? Are people going to trust us when we do that? I don't think so. They're going to say: "Oh look at him or her. Trashing somebody else behind their back. I bet you they're going to talk that way about me. I'd better not become friendly with them."

So you see, when we have these minds that are looking for a good reputation and avoiding a bad one, we end up creating a bad reputation for ourselves. We accumulate a lot of negative karma because we are talking behind somebody's back and creating disharmony.

Needing praise and approval vs. learning to evaluate ourselves

What about when we're attached to praise and approval, when we want other people to say nice things to us and to approve of us, to like us? We all want people to go: "Oh, you're so wonderful!" And then we act very shy but inside we're going: "More praise, more, more."

We want them to say: "You're so wonderful. You're so talented. You're so good-looking."

“Who, me?”

“You’re so rich.”

“Oh, how did you notice?”

We want to hear people say all sorts of nice things to us. Then we get puffed up and arrogant: “Oh, they approve of me. They think I’m good. Therefore I must be good.”

Is that true? Does other people saying nice things to you mean you are a good person? No, it doesn’t mean that at all, because people could say all sorts of things to us that they don’t mean. Even if they do mean it, if we don’t have confidence in ourselves, we can hear lots of nice words but our feeling of lack of self-esteem is not going to go away.

Sometimes we think: “If only more people praise me, I will feel good about myself. I know I am a good person.” In actual fact, the whole world can praise us but if we don’t believe in ourselves, it doesn’t do any good to that feeling of ache inside. Not realizing that, coupled with our self-centered mind, we try and go about doing all these things that we hope will make other people like us and make other people approve of us. We act very insincerely. We say things we don’t mean. We flatter people and praise them when we really don’t mean it.

You know what we do especially? When we meet somebody whom we want to like us, we think: “What do I need to become so that that person will like me? What do I think they think I should be?” Isn’t that what we think? “What do I think they think I should be, because if I can become what I think they think I should be, then they’ll like me.”

Especially when we meet somebody we’re romantically attracted to: “Oh, how can I become what I think he thinks I should be?” We get an idea of what we think the other person thinks we should be and we try and become that. Of course we aren’t that. We’re putting up a false front. We’re pretending to be somebody we aren’t.

Then after they have fallen for us and think that we’re wonderful and love us, we say: “Okay, now I don’t have to be what they want me to be anymore. I can just be myself.” All of our nasty qualities come out. We boss the person around. We pester them. We nag at them. We criticize them. Then they say: “What happened to you? You aren’t acting anything like this when I fell in love with you!” We reply: “Well, I’m just the same person.”

Well, we may be the same person but we aren’t acting the same way because before we were trying to become what we thought they think we should be. We made them fall in love with somebody that we weren’t. Is that a good foundation for a marriage – making a person fall in love with somebody whom you aren’t? Is that going to be a happy marriage? No.

I think in our relationships, we need to try to be who we are rather than try and be other than what we are. Does that mean that we should just be nasty to other people from the very beginning? No. Does it mean we should be nice to them and then later be nasty? No. It means we should try and change ourselves, be sincere and be a kind person right from the very beginning.

We need to be who we are because even if we go through our whole life trying to please other people, we’re still never going to succeed. What other people want us to be is unlimited. We may try to become what other people want but they’re never going to be satisfied. And you know what? Neither will we be satisfied because we can’t go through our whole life pretending to be something that we aren’t. We can’t go through our whole life living a life that we think they think we should live.

We all have our own unique talents. We have our own unique abilities. We need to figure out what those are and live from that space in our own hearts, and live with a kind intention wanting to be of benefit and service to others. If we do that, then we’re being sincere and we’re being honest with people. We’re not putting on an act and pretending to be what we aren’t. And then if they like us, we know that they like us for who we are.

On our part, we are also trying to be a kinder person because we recognize that kindness, as opposed to trying to please other people with an insincere motivation, is what establishes good relationships.

Are you getting what I’m talking about? Is this making some sense to you? Really think about it, because if

you're always trying to be somebody that you think your parents want you to be or you're trying to be what your friends want you to be or what your boss wants you to be, you're never going to succeed completely in being that. And in the meantime, whatever unique talents and abilities you have aren't going to have an opportunity to come out and be used. You're just putting on a face, being what you aren't, and eventually it's all going to crumble, isn't it?

We all know what happens when we are insincere. We can't hold that up our whole life, can we? We can't hold it up for very long, in fact. We should really try and be who we are, use our own unique abilities and be kind rather than try and please people just because we want them to like us. That doesn't work. It just brings a lot of confusion in our life and in their lives.

We need to look inside ourselves and see: "Okay, is what I'm doing ethically correct? Am I a good person on the inside?" If we're just acting like a good person on the outside, we still won't feel good about ourselves. Our lack of self-esteem or our insecurity comes from inside of us and will be there even if the whole world praises us. We need to learn to evaluate our own actions. Instead of just looking for other people to say: "Oh, you're so wonderful," we should look inside, be honest with ourselves and ask ourselves: "Was I acting kindly or was I trying to impress somebody? Did I help somebody because I really cared about them? Did I do it to try and make them like me?"

Being kind in order to make somebody like us – that's not creating good karma. It's basically lying, isn't it? It's not very sincere. Does that mean we should just harm people? No, it doesn't mean that. We have to change ourselves and let go of our negative attitudes. We should learn to evaluate our own behavior. Even if other people criticize us, if we look inside and we see: "Okay, I did what I did with awareness. I did it with a kind attitude. I wasn't acting unethically," then it is okay. Even if somebody was unhappy with what we did, it doesn't matter because from our side, we know what we did was the right thing to do.

If somebody praises us but when we look inside we say: "You know, I was just putting on a face and I was basically lying to the other person," then do we feel good about ourselves? You don't feel good about yourself when you're lying to other people. Your own self-esteem goes down even if those other people like you.

Lots of Singaporeans come to me and say: "When we do business, to close the business deal, we have to present the truth in a particular way that isn't exactly the way it is, but it's the way I have to do it to be able to sell my product or do my job."

So many people tell me this! Is that good for your country? Is that good for you personally? I don't think so. But then people say: "Nobody is going to buy my product if I tell the truth."

Well, if you aren't making a good product, you should make a better one. They should buy your product because it's good, not because you're lying about it. Because you see, if we lie, sooner or later other people will find out that we lied and they're not going to trust us after that. Especially in business, if you sell a product based on not telling the truth, then afterwards when other people figured out that you were lying to them, they're never going to come to your company again.

Whereas if you are truthful, like if you tell them honestly: "This works well but that part doesn't work so well," people are going to trust you and they're going to continue to do business with you over a long period of time. That's better for you personally and it's better for the country as a whole. So really think about this.

Now we're going to get into the text.

Chapter 2 Verse 24:

With prostrations as numerous as the atoms within all the Buddha-fields, I bow to the Buddhas present in all the three times, to the Dharma, and to the Sublime Assembly.

Here, we're thinking of the Buddhas, Dharma and Sangha. The 'Sublime Assembly' refers to the Sangha. We're thinking of the Buddhas of the three times – the past, the present and the future.

'With prostrations as numerous as the atoms within all the Buddha-fields' – what you think is however many universes there are, however many Buddha lands there are, with that many bodies, you offer prostrations. You can visualize all your previous lives offering prostrations to the Buddhas, Dharma and Sangha. You can

imagine yourself doing that many prostrations. The idea is that you are wholeheartedly showing your respect and regard for the Three Jewels.

Why do we show respect and regard for the Three Jewels? Because they have many good qualities and we want to develop those same good qualities.

Chapter 2 Verse 25:

Likewise, I pay homage to all the shrines and to the resting-places of the Bodhisattva. I prostrate to the preceptors and to the praiseworthy adepts as well.

We're paying respect to all the shrines, the stupas, the pagodas, the places where the Buddhas live. We're prostrating to all the preceptors, all of our teachers, all sincere practitioners. In doing so, we create a karmic link with them. By seeing their good qualities, we become receptive to developing those same good qualities ourselves.

Chapter 2 Verse 26:

I go for refuge to the Buddha as far as the quintessence of enlightenment; I go for refuge to the Dharma and the community of Bodhisattvas.

Here we're taking the Mahayana refuge. We're going to the Buddha, Dharma and the assembly of bodhisattvas for refuge. Refuge means that we are trusting them as our spiritual guides. Taking refuge means that we've seen the qualities of the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, we've thought about the teachings that the Buddha gave, we have some faith and confidence in them because we've thought about them, we want to practice them, and so we're entrusting ourselves to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha to guide us to Enlightenment.

Taking refuge is something that we do everyday in our Dharma practice. It's also something that we can do in a ceremony. There's a very nice ceremony that you do with a Dharma teacher where you formally take refuge in the Three Jewels. At that time, you also have the opportunity to take any or all of the five precepts – abandoning killing, stealing, unwise sexual behavior, lying and intoxicants.

So there's that way of formally taking refuge where you become a Buddhist and where you feel the practice of people who have studied and actualized the path from the time of the Buddha down to your own teacher, and you're joining into that energy, into the lineage of practitioners. It's quite a wonderful ceremony to do.

Taking refuge is also something we do everyday. We should do it when we first get up in the morning and also before we go to sleep at night.

We should entrust ourselves to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha for spiritual guidance before we do any kind of important project. When we do that, what we're actually doing is we're reminding ourselves of the Dharma teachings. The more we remember the teachings and try and live according to them, the happier our life is going to be.

Chapter 2 Verses 27-29:

27. With folded hands I beseech the Fully Awakened Ones present in all directions and the greatly compassionate Bodhisattvas.

28. Whatever negativity I, a brute, have committed or caused others to commit in this life and others throughout the beginningless cycle of existence,

29. And anything in which I have deludedly rejoiced, thereby harming myself—that transgression I confess, overcome by remorse.

We're now getting into one of the main parts of Chapter Two, which is the confession of our wrongdoings. This is very important because all of us have made mistakes but if we can't be honest about our mistakes and admit them and clean them up, then they're just going to fester underneath the surface and create a lot of unhappiness in our life and bring us a lot of guilt and remorse. In addition, the negative karma we create is going to be there ready to ripen into experiences of suffering and misery.

This process of confession or revealing our wrongdoing, of owning up to our misdeeds is very important. It's psychologically cleansing and very healing. It's also spiritually uplifting, because it takes a lot of energy to try and cover up our mistakes, doesn't it?

Is there anybody here who has never made a mistake? Is there anybody here who has always acted ethically? Is there anybody here who has never lied? Or never talked behind somebody's back? Or never said mean things to somebody? Is there anybody here who's never killed another living being including animals and insects? Or never stolen anything? We've done a lot of negative karma, haven't we?

This negative karma can be the source of a great amount of low self-esteem, a great amount of guilt in our life. If we reveal these negativities and own up to them, make a determination to avoid doing them again in the future and let them go, we will be able to put that energy behind us and not be psychologically and spiritually burdened by them.

So these verses that we're getting into now where we'll be confessing our negativities are very important. Somebody asked previously if I would explain how to purify negative karma, so that's what I'm going to do right now – the purification practice through which we clean up all the misdeeds and negativities that we've done in the past.

Purification Through The Four Opponent Powers

There's something called the Four Opponent Powers. We do the four opponent powers to enable us to purify these negative karmas.

First opponent power: regret

The first of the four opponent powers is regret. Regret means that we acknowledge our negative action and we regret it. We're sorry that we did it.

Regret is very different from guilt

Regret is very different from guilt. I really want to talk about this. This is very important because some people go around their whole lives feeling very guilty. But guilt is a very useless emotion. It's different from regret because when we have regret, there is a certain factor of wisdom: we're looking at the situation, we see that we acted inappropriately and we regret that. So there's wisdom; we're acknowledging it. We're sincere in regretting it and we're going to let it go. We're not going to let that negative action weigh on us anymore.

Whereas very often guilt doesn't have any wisdom at all or any genuine regret. What are we thinking when we feel guilty? "Oh, I'm so terrible! Look at what I did – I'm such a horrible person! Nobody is ever going to like me. They're never going to trust me because I'm really this disgusting person. What I did is terrible. I can never look at anybody again. This is awful! I feel so bad! My whole life, I'm going to be weighed down with this. Oh poor me!"

That's the way we are when we feel guilty, isn't it? Isn't that what's going on in our mind? Who's the star of the show when we feel guilty? Who are we thinking about? Ourselves, aren't we? Do we really care that we hurt somebody else's feelings? No! We don't have time to care about the other person. We're too busy feeling terrible about ourselves. That's why I say guilt is useless, because sitting there feeling terrible about ourselves is just another kind of self-infatuation, of self-importance, of making a bigger deal out of ourselves than we really are.

What is guilt saying? Guilt is saying: "If I can't be the best one, I'm going to be the worst one. But somehow, I'm very special. I'm so guilty. The whole situation is awful because of me!" It's really an inflated sense of power, isn't it?

"I can make everything go wrong" - *that's how powerful I am.*

"The marriage is a mess all because of me!" - *I'm very powerful. All by myself.*

"The whole office, my company is a mess, all because of me." - *I'm really powerful. I can make it all go wrong.*

It's really an inflated sense of self, isn't it? Whenever there's some disagreement or something is going wrong,

it's not just due to one person. There're multiple causes and conditions. We shouldn't be so inflated and think that we can make everything go wrong all by ourselves.

When we feel guilty, we're really stuck. Whereas when we feel regret, we're seeing our mistake. We're acknowledging it. We're not feeling ashamed and covering it up. With guilt, we feel ashamed. We cover it up and never really acknowledge it. Sometimes we don't even acknowledge our own misdeeds to ourselves because we're too busy justifying and rationalizing, but inside we still feel guilty.

Whereas with regret, we're acknowledging it. We're not feeling ashamed. We know we aren't an inherently evil person. We know it was a negative action. We regret it. We want to abandon doing it again. And so we can own up to it. And so in the presence of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas, we tell them our negative actions.

I think this is very healthy and very important for us, because if we can't admit our negative actions, we're going to go through our whole life doing a big song and dance routine trying to look good. It takes a lot of energy to cover up our mistakes. Whereas if we own our mistakes, apologize and have a strong determination to try and do better in the future, then we can clean the things up.

Second opponent power: the determination not to do the action again

The second of the four opponent powers is the determination not to do the action again. This is really making a strong intention not to do a negative action again: "Whenever I do this, I just don't feel right afterwards and I know this isn't a healthy thing to do. I'm going to do my best not to do that again."

With some actions, it may be very difficult to say: "I'm never going to do it again." For example, do you think you can truthfully say you're never going to gossip again? Would you be lying if you say you're never going to gossip again? We might be lying if we say we're never going to do it again. So it's better to say: "I'm going to try really hard not to do it."

Or it may be better to set a time frame: "For the next two days, I'm going to be incredibly vigilant and not gossip about people." And so on those two days you are very vigilant. And then you get some self-confidence: "Oh yeah! I can do that for two days. I did it." That gives you confidence to continue to not do that in the future.

Third opponent power: restoring the relationship

I translate the Tibetan term for the third opponent power a little differently from the usual translation. I call it 'restoring the relationship'.

When we do negative actions, they're done against other beings – either against the Triple Gem (the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha) and our spiritual master, somebody who is worthy of respect, or against ordinary sentient beings. Whenever we do a negative action to any of them, it damages the relationship with them. Why? Because our intention towards the others has been negative.

What we need to do to fix that is to generate a constructive, beneficial intention towards them. In terms of the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, a constructive intention towards them is taking refuge in them. In terms of other sentient beings, a beneficial intention is developing bodhicitta, having love and compassion for them.

In this third opponent power, what we do is we take refuge in our spiritual mentors, in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, and we generate bodhicitta: the loving compassionate intention to become a fully enlightened Buddha for the benefit of all beings. When we do that, because we're changing our attitude towards whoever we harm, in effect we're restoring the relationship with them.

Now the question comes. It's fine to restore the relationship inside of ourselves, but shouldn't we also go and apologize to the other person?

Well yes, if the situation is such that you can apologize, it's very good to do that. But sometimes, the person with whom we created the negative karma is dead and we can't go and apologize to them. In some cases, the person has very hurt feelings and it's difficult to apologize to them because they're not ready to talk to us yet. We have to respect that and so that's why this one of restoring the relationship is referring to changing our intention.

In our mind, we're letting go of any kind of negative thoughts or emotions that we had either towards our spiritual teacher and the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, or towards sentient beings. We're letting go of those negative thoughts and emotions and we're creating positive ones in place of them – taking refuge, generating bodhicitta. When we do that, we're changing the intention in our own mind.

The important thing to do in order to purify the negative karma, is to transform what's happening inside of ourselves. In addition to that, if it's possible to apologize to the other person, we should do that. But it's not always necessary to do that, because like I said, sometimes we've lost touch with them, or they're still feeling very hurt, they don't want to talk to us, or maybe they've died, or who knows what. So if we can apologize, it's good, but otherwise, the important thing is transforming our own heart.

Now, I think if we can apologize sooner rather than later, it's good. Because we never know when we're going to die. We never know when the other person is going to die. How would you feel if in your own heart you've acknowledged that you hurt somebody's feelings or you acted inappropriately but because your pride is interfering, you haven't gone to them to apologize, and then they died? You would feel pretty bad, wouldn't you?

You've been wanting to apologize but your ego got in the way. You're feeling very proud: "Okay, I recognize I did a negative action, but I'm not going to apologize." But you know, when we don't apologize, who gets hurt by it? It's us, isn't it? Because what happens if we die before we apologize? Or what happens if the other person dies? We will be sitting there feeling: "Gee, I should have apologized. It was just my ego that kept me from doing it." To avoid those kinds of situation, it's much better to clean things up with people right away, as soon as we can so it doesn't fester.

One time I was at a conference about death and dying for people who were doing hospice work and also for the general public, people who wanted to talk about that. I remember that during the conference and the workshop, many people went up to the microphone to talk about their own personal experiences. Many people were saying how they had acted in a harmful way towards a family member or friend, and that person had died and now they feel so bad because they never apologized to that person.

I remember hearing so many people say this at the conference, and I was thinking: "They're telling 500 people how sorry they are for a negative action they did years ago, but we're not the people who need to hear it. The one person who needs to hear it, they didn't say it to." That made me feel really bad for them because when we can go and apologize, it just clears things up.

When other people apologize to us, we should be gracious and accept their apology. We shouldn't go: "Well, it's about time. Gee it's taken you a long time. You hurt my feelings so bad. You were such an idiot, I can't believe what you did, it's about time you apologize, you jerk!"

That's not the way we should talk to somebody who comes and apologizes to us. Instead we should let go of our resentment and our rancor and we should probably apologize to them if we were holding negative feelings against them.

You know how sometimes when our feelings have been hurt, we sit there and go: "I'm going to wait for them to apologize. I'm so mad at them. I can't stand them. I'm really mad!" You've got to live with them. You're related to them. You're married to them. They're your mother or your child or whatever. "I'm not going to apologize! They have to apologize to me because it's all their fault anyway. They started the fight."

We talk like that a lot to ourselves, don't we? "They started it. It was all their fault! They owe me an apology." Then when they come and apologize to us, we go: "It's about time you idiot! Too bad you realize it only after you've acted so poorly towards me."

Actually we should also apologize to them because we've been sitting there holding a lot of negative emotions towards them, haven't we? When we're sitting there holding a grudge towards somebody else, is that a virtuous state of mind? Are we creating good karma when we hold a grudge? No, far from it! So when that person finally apologizes to us, if we've been holding a negative intention towards them, we might consider apologizing to them too. Just clear it up, let's admit that we all had a share in what happened instead of putting all the blame on one person.

When people apologize to us it's very important to be gracious and to accept their apology.

Fourth opponent power: remedial action

The fourth of the four opponent powers is some kind of remedial behavior or remedial action. This could be any kind of virtuous action. It could be a Dharma practice such as chanting mantra, doing a meditation practice, bowing to the Buddhas, studying the Dharma, visualizing the Buddha or doing breathing meditation. It could be making offerings, helping to print books for free distribution, volunteering your services to help organize Dharma events or volunteering your time to help at a temple or a Dharma center.

It could be doing some kind of volunteer work in society or being generous, giving some kind of offering to the poor, or to people who are sick. Any kind of virtuous practice. There are many ways to do this last part which is the remedial behavior.

When we have some negative actions that we want to clean up, we do these four opponent powers – regretting them, making a determination not to do them again, repairing the relationship by taking refuge and generating bodhicitta, and doing some kind of remedial behavior, doing some kind of virtuous action. So this is how we purify our negative actions.

It's highly recommended to do these four opponent powers everyday, because basically we create negative karma everyday, don't we? If you look at it, we do. We create negative karma everyday, so we should do some kind of purification every evening in order to clean up all the things that have happened during the day.

Sometimes people do purification retreats. They'll do a special retreat that is focused very strongly on these four opponent powers and really putting their energy into cleaning up their lives, regretting their negativities, making new determinations, doing remedial actions, taking refuge, generating bodhicitta.

These retreats are very wonderful. People change a lot doing them because you take the time to look at your own life and be honest about it and clean things up. When we clean up things in our own life, then we stop feeling guilty. When the time of death arrives, we aren't afraid and we don't have any regrets. Whereas if we haven't cleaned up our negativities, when death comes, there is so much fear and so much regret. Who wants to die with fear and regret? I don't think any of us wants to die that way.

In Verse 28, it says: whatever negativity I, a brute, have committed or caused others to commit. Sometimes we make other people do negative actions. For example, you ask a family member to lie for you. Or you tell your employee to be dishonest. Or you tell somebody to take something for you that hasn't been freely given. You get people involved in criticizing other people behind their back. Or you get people involved in your quarrels and get them all raved up and angry so that they say harsh words to somebody else. These are negative actions that we've caused other people to do so we've also got to regret those.

In the next verse, it says 'anything in which I have deludedly rejoiced'. In other words, when we have rejoiced at other people's negative actions, we have to confess that as well. We may not have said anything cruel about somebody, but we hear that somebody else did and we go: "Oh good! I'm glad they told that person off. They deserve that!" That's rejoicing in negativity. Or if we read the newspaper: "Oh they killed all these people. Good! They're such an evil person. I'm glad they're killed."

Whenever we rejoice at negative actions, we create negative karma ourselves. I was reading a Singapore newspaper somebody gave me. There was a report that a young man who killed a child was going to be hanged. I was reading about that and I felt so sorry. The young man has an IQ of 76; he doesn't understand what he is doing. An IQ of 100 is normal; 76 is very low. To execute somebody like that who does not have complete intelligence – why do that?

If you rejoice about that kind of thing, saying: "Oh good! He killed somebody, we've got to go kill him," you're just going to create a lot of negative karma yourself. If a person does a harmful action, then maybe they need to be in prison so that they don't harm somebody else. But why kill them? And why rejoice in somebody else killing them?

So these are the kinds of things that we are confessing – wrongdoings that we've done, that we've caused others to do, that we've rejoiced at when other people have done them.

Chapter 2 Verses 30-31:

30. Whatever offense I have committed, out of disrespect, with my body, speech, and mind against the Three Jewels, against mothers and fathers, and against spiritual mentors and others,

31. And whatever terrible vices I, a person who has done negative actions, defiled with many faults, have done, O Guides, I confess them all.

Here, we're confessing any negative actions that we may have done with a mind of disrespect and that we've done by means of body, speech and mind. This includes harmful actions that we've done with our body: killing, stealing and unwise sexual behavior; harmful actions we've done verbally: lying, creating disharmony, harsh words and gossip; negative actions we've done mentally: a mind full of coveting and attachment, ill will and wrong views.

We're confessing all the times when we've been disrespectful towards those who were worthy of respect. We may have been disrespectful towards the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, for example criticizing Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. You see people do it all the time. We may have, for example stolen the offerings that have been given to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha and we're confessing these.

We're confessing actions that we've done against our parents, when we've had spoken negatively to our parents, when we've called them names or lost our temper.

Now it's true, it's impossible to please our parents all the time. We can't please our parents 100% of the time, but not pleasing them is different from having a negative attitude and swearing at them or throwing things at them or screaming at them or calling them names. We're regretting those kinds of disrespectful actions.

We're also regretting ways in which we have disrespected our spiritual mentors. Our relationship with our Dharma teachers is a very important relationship. In fact I would say it's the most important relationship in our life because this is the person who is going to teach us the Dharma which is going to enable us to get out of cyclic existence. If we then turn our back on this person, criticize them, get angry at them, call them names and speak in a very disrespectful way, we're harming ourselves very badly.

We're creating a lot of negative karma because here is the very person who is trying to lead us to Enlightenment, who is being really kind and with compassion, giving us teachings, but we're seeing them as an enemy. When our mind sees somebody's compassion as an enemy, then our mind is really pretty messed up at that moment. So we really have to regret that kind of negativity and repair that relationship. It's very important, because otherwise we run the risk of just leaving the Dharma altogether and that's not very good to do.

So we're regretting whatever terrible vices, whatever mistaken actions that we've done. We're confessing and acknowledging all of them in the presence of the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.

Then it says:

Chapter 2 Verse 32:

How shall I escape it? Rescue me quickly! May death not soon creep up on me before my vices have vanished.

Remember I was saying that Shantideva talks in the first person? So here he's asking himself, and he's also trying to get us to ask: "How shall I escape it? I've done all these negative actions, how am I going to avoid experiencing the painful results of them? These negative karmic seeds are on my mind. If I don't purify them quickly and I die before I purify, how am I going to avoid experiencing the painful results of my own actions?"

So that's what Shantideva is saying: "Rescue me quickly!" Calling out to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha saying: "Teach me how to purify my own mind. Rescue me from this kind of negativity. May death not soon creep up on me before my vices have vanished." In other words: "May I not die before I've had the chance to purify."

But then he goes on and reflects:

Chapter 2 Verse 33:

Death does not differentiate between tasks done and undone. This traitor is not to be trusted by the healthy or the ill, for it is like an unexpected, great thunderbolt.

So while we may not want to die soon, we may want to have a lot of time so that we can purify our negativities, death doesn't discriminate. When our karma is finished or when a negative karma ripens to intervene and cause illness and an untimely death, we have no choice but to die.

Death can come when we're sick. It can come when we're healthy. We know people who have been completely healthy one day but they were in a terrible car crash and were dead the next day. Or they were healthy one day but they had a brain aneurism and were dead the next day. Or they had a heart attack and were dead the next day.

Death does not differentiate between the sick and the healthy. It can strike at any time. We have no idea when it will come.

Death also doesn't differentiate between tasks done and tasks undone. So it's not like we can say: "Okay, I'm going to do everything I want to do and then I'll die." We always die with something undone, because we're always in the middle of doing something. If spend our time thinking: "Well, I'll practice the Dharma later. First I'll have to do this other thing. I have plenty of time to live. I'm young. Death is not going to happen soon. Death is going to happen later. After I've done all these other things, after I've finished all my worldly affairs, after I've finished doing my Dharma practice, then death will come."

Is that a wise way to think? No, that's not very wise at all because death comes at any time, whether we're ready for it or not. Whether we've practiced the Dharma, whether we haven't. So this mind that's always saying: "I'll practice Dharma tomorrow" – this mind is a big enemy. That thought is a big enemy because we don't know if we're going to be alive tomorrow, do we?

Can you guarantee that you're going to be alive tomorrow? Can anybody guarantee for us that we're going to be alive tomorrow? Nobody can guarantee that, can they? So if we're going to do Dharma practice, we have to do it now because now is the only time to practice the Dharma. It doesn't matter how old you are. Death can come at any moment and we only have now to practice so it's important that we practice now.

The mind that's saying: "Later. First I'll make some money. I'll have a good time. I'll do this and that and the other thing. Then I'll practice the Dharma." Does 'later' ever happen?

When we see that death could happen at any time, then we know we have to practice the Dharma right now. Very important. Why is it important? Because at the time of death, our body doesn't come with us. Our friends don't come with us. Our relatives don't come with us. Our money and possessions don't come with us. Our fame and reputation don't come with us. All of the praise and approval we've received don't come with us.

The only thing that comes with us at the time of death is our karma and mental habits. Those are the only things that come with the continuity of consciousness at the time of death. We can spend our whole life working very hard to get money, possessions, a good reputation, love and appreciation, but none of those things come with us at the time of death. What comes with us is all the negative karma we accumulated getting those things – by lying, by being dishonest, by talking behind people's backs. All that negative karma comes with us. But all the things that we created negative karma to get don't come at all.

Even if we're so famous and well-respected that everybody in the world mourns when we die, we aren't even here to enjoy it. Of what use is a good reputation after you die? Sometimes we sit there and we think: "People don't appreciate me enough. I'm so wonderful. But after I die, at my funeral, they're going to be crying, they're going to say such nice, wonderful things about me." Where are you going to be at that time? Are you going to be around to hear and listen to it? No. We're going to be in our next life. So people may be crying about us here but we have no idea. We are already in our next life.

Chapter 2 Verses 34-39:

34. *I have committed various vices for the sake of friends and enemies. This I have not recognized: "Leaving everyone behind, I must pass away."*

35. *My enemies will not remain, nor will my friends remain. I shall not remain. Nothing will remain.*

36. *Whatever is experienced will fade to a memory. Like an experience in a dream, everything that has passed will not be seen again.*

37. *Even in this life, as I have stood by, many friends and enemies have passed away, but terrible negativity induced by them remains ahead of me.*

38. *Thus, I have not considered that I am ephemeral. Due to delusion, attachment, and hatred, I have committed many negativities.*

39. *Day and night, a life span unceasingly diminishes, and there is no adding onto it. Shall I not die then?*

So what all these verses are saying is that for the benefit of our friends and relatives, we've created a lot of negative karma. Yet at the time of death, we separate from these friends and relatives. When we are dying, even if our friends and relatives are all around us, can they prevent us from dying? Not at all. Even if they're all around us. They're holding our hand saying: "I love you so much. Don't leave!" Can that prevent us from dying? No.

At the time of death, our friends and relatives can't really help us very much. In fact sometimes they make our death more difficult because they're crying and wailing, and instead of being able to focus on dying mindfully and generating a good motivation ourselves, we feel like we have to take care of our friends and relatives.

For the sake of these same friends and relatives, we've done so many negative actions and at the time of our death, all that negative karma comes with us. Our friends and relatives stay here but we carry the negative karma with us and will in time experience their unhappy results.

Similarly, our enemies, the people we don't like, the people we can't stand, the people whom we want to harm and retaliate against because they've hurt us – those people are also going to die. When we die, they stay here. We go on alone. Why try and harm an enemy if they are going to die some day? What value is it harming somebody else if we're just going to create negative karma and when we go on to our next life, take that negative karma with us, whereas that enemy stays here? What use is it harming somebody else because that just creates more negative karma, more stuff for us to purify?

So in these verses, what Shantideva is doing is he is warning us against creating negative karma in relationship to friends or enemies or even strangers. He's also letting us know how important it is that we purify and practice the four opponent powers before we die so that we don't take that negative karma with us to future lives.

Questions and Answers

[Audience:] Taking the bodhisattva vows entails committing to it in our future lives as well. How can we ensure that in our future lives, we will still continue taking this responsibility?

[Ven. Chodron:] We practice hard. When we take the bodhisattva vow, the more we're able to keep the vow, the more incredible good karma we create. Just keeping the bodhisattva vow helps us to create the cause for a good rebirth in the future. It doesn't ensure it, but it sure helps to create a lot of causes for it.

Even if we don't know what we're going to be reborn as in the future, still it's good to take the bodhisattva vows because the imprint of the vows will be there and it will definitely influence our future lives in a positive way so that in one lifetime or another, we will again meet Mahayana teachers and be able to practice. Even if by some chance, we're born as an animal in between, still maybe we'll be a kind animal and then after that, be able to have another precious human life and continue to practice.

[Audience:] How can I learn to let go and watch my children make mistakes? I want to get out of this suffering of worrying and nagging at them.

[Ven. Chodron:] Good for you! When you worry and when you nag at your kids, you just create a lot of disturbance in your relationship with them. The kids won't want to be around you because every time they are around you, you're nagging at them. You're worrying about them. This person who really wants to stop nagging at and worrying about their kids – good for you!

How do you do that? How do you let your kids make their own mistakes? You realize that your job as a parent is to educate your children. You give them an education. You teach them good ethical values. By education I don't mean Math, English and things like this. You teach them how to be a good human being. You teach them how to be kind. You teach them good ethical values. You teach them how to deal with their frustration in situations where they cannot get what they want.

That's a very important life skill that parents need to teach their kids – how to deal with the frustration of not getting what you want, because your kids are going to experience that some time in their life.

So you teach them these skills and then you have to let go. You have to let them learn through their own experience. If we all look at our own lives, we can all see that sometimes we have to make mistakes in order to learn very important things. If you look at your own life, is that true? That sometimes you had to do really stupid things to learn something very important? Maybe people tried very hard beforehand to tell you that it was a stupid thing to do but you couldn't understand it. They talked until they were blue in the face, but we didn't listen. We had to go and live through that experience, and then we knew from the experience that it was a mistake.

So there're some things like this where as a parent, you may want to protect your child from the suffering of making mistakes but you can't. That's not your job. At some point, or at many different points as your child is growing up, you have to let them make their own decisions and, through making mistakes, learn that they have to be responsible for their actions.

It's very important that the kids learn that they are responsible for their actions, that if they do certain things, certain results are going to come – not only karmic results in future lives but results even in this lifetime. Sometimes your kids just have to make mistakes no matter what you do. You've given them the tools, so it's better sometimes that you just sat back and let them try and develop their own wisdom. Maybe they'll do it well. Maybe they'll make a mistake, but that's the way they'll learn.

Do you remember when you were a teenager, how much did you know? When we were teenagers and young adults, we thought we knew everything. Our parents gave us advice but at times we thought: "My parents – why are they giving me that advice? They're not very smart." But as you live your life longer and you make mistakes, then sometimes you see that your parents' advice was good. But at that time you couldn't see it. The only way you learn is by making mistakes.

Sometimes you stop worrying. You stop nagging at your kids. They go out and they do something and they do it very well. You might be surprised at how much you can trust your kids. So sometimes give them some credit and stop worrying about them and trust them. Trust in their own wisdom that even if they make a mistake, they'll learn and it will be good in the end. And they may not make a mistake. They may do something very wise. And in fact sometimes your advice may not be the best thing for them. You have to give them that kind of space.

[Audience:] How can I help my late mother whom I love very much to create more positive karma and have a good rebirth?

[Ven. Chodron:] When we have friends and relatives, people whom we care very much about who have died, it's very good to create some positive potential, to create some merit and dedicate it to them. This creates a good energy field around them.

What can be very good to do is to take some of their possessions and donate them to a charity. Take things that belong to your mother, or father, or whoever it is who died whom you love, and offer them to a charity. By giving away that person's belongings, it's like they are creating the good karma of being generous, and that will help them. Or make offerings to a temple. Make offerings to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. Make

offerings to monasteries. By being generous, you create positive karma, then you dedicate that for the welfare of your deceased loved ones.

Another thing to do is to recite the King of Prayers. This is a very beautiful prayer by the bodhisattva Samantabhadra. You can recite that and dedicate that for your loved ones. You can sponsor prayers and so on. So basically you do many positive actions.

What is also very nice to do is to do a meditation practice with your loved ones. For example, visualize or imagine your loved ones with Kuan Yin on top of their head, and then when you say 'om mani padme hum' or when you say 'Namo Guan Shi Yin Pu Sa', imagine much light from Kuan Yin flowing down into your loved ones, cleansing their negative karma and bringing them realizations of the Dharma path. Doing this kind of meditation – visualizing Kuan Yin's compassionate light flowing into your loved one – can be very helpful.

[Audience:] What are your views on worshipping the Buddha's and his disciples' relics? Isn't Buddhism becoming commercialized, or is this my wrong view?

[Ven. Chodron:] The purpose of going to see relics is to inspire our mind so that we practice the Dharma. While it is true that if we bow to the relics, if we make offerings to the relics, if we're doing something positive like that in relationship to the relics, we're creating good karma, the real purpose of seeing the relics, is to think: "Wow! There were these holy beings who learnt the teachings and put them into practice in their daily life and who really tried to purify and develop their good qualities. I want to be like them."

So if you see the relics and you generate that kind of thought where you feel inspired to do more practice, that's the real purpose of having the relics here. Out of respect for those holy beings and their realizations and because you want to gain those realizations, then if you bow and make offerings, you create a lot of merit.

However, to answer the question about commercialization, we should not charge people and make them pay a lot of money to see the relics or things like that. I feel very strongly that Dharma teachings should be freely given and that things that are wonderful and virtuous should be very freely shared.

[Audience:] If Mother Teresa were a Buddhist, since her heart is pure and brimming with so much loving-kindness and compassion, wouldn't she have gone very far on the path to Enlightenment?

[Ven. Chodron:] Yes, why not? Mother Teresa did a lot of very wonderful actions caring for other people. Even though she was not a Buddhist, by the power of her loving compassionate actions, I'm sure that'll help her to have a good rebirth and to progress along the path to Enlightenment.

[Audience:] If people want to do serious Dharma practice, will marriage and childbirth hinder their spiritual progress? On the other hand, what are the benefits of marriage and childbirth to their Dharma practice?

[Ven. Chodron:] This depends completely on the individual. If you have a family and you develop a lot of attachment to your family so that you ignore your Dharma practice and you're always worried about your family, you don't want to be generous because you want your children to have the money, and if you've committed many negative actions for the benefit of your family, then having a family doesn't have much purpose.

On the other hand, if you have a family and you try and teach your children the Dharma, if you teach them good ethical values and to be generous and kind people, that's very good. You create good karma and they do too.

If you use your family life as a practice of patience, then you will also progress along the path because it takes a lot of patience, love and compassion to live in a family, doesn't it? Because all your relatives are not going to do what you want and you have to practice patience with them.

In Chapter Six of the text that we're studying, Shantideva talks all about patience, and we very often have to practice that with our family. If you practice patience in your family, you accumulate positive potential. So it depends very much on the individual whether their family life becomes a cause for Enlightenment or a cause for a lot of suffering. It depends on your mind, whether you're kind, whether you're ethical, what your intention is.

I think it's very helpful for a couple if they make the Dharma a very important part of their life together so that they help and encourage each other in their Dharma practice. It's very nice if you do some meditation practice together or go to Dharma teachings together. It's a very good example for children to see their parents practicing the Dharma.

Parents often tell their children: "Just sit still and be quiet!" Don't you say that to your kids sometimes? But do your kids ever see you sit still and be quiet? No! So if they've never seen you sit still and being patient and calm, how are they going to develop it? But if in your marriage, you give great emphasis to the cultivation of Dharma values and the husband and wife really help each other in the Dharma practice, then your children have a good frame of reference and they will copy that good behavior.

On the other hand, if there're people who don't want to have a family, I think that's perfectly fine. I don't think parents should nag their children to get married and to give them grandchildren.

If you have children who want to ordain, I think you should definitely encourage it, because it's an incredible blessing for the whole family to have somebody who is ordained. Then you have your very own Dharma teacher in the family.

If people want to ordain, I think they should be encouraged to do that because the work that they do on themselves as an ordained person, they dedicate it for the benefit of the entire planet, for all beings, so everybody benefits from that.