

Commentary on
Shantideva's "A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life"
Chapter 2: Disclosure of Wrongdoing - Part 4 of 4
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We'll continue with the text. Remember that in the earlier verses, we've bowed to the Buddha. We've made offerings of beautiful objects, including a bath, to the Buddha.

Purification with the four opponent powers

Now we are beginning to open up, confess and reveal our own negativities. We're contemplating the four opponent powers:

- 1) having regret for our negative actions,
- 2) having a determination not to do them again,
- 3) taking refuge and generating bodhicitta in order to restore the relationship with whoever it was whom we harmed, and
- 4) a remedial action.

Shantideva is leading us through this by showing us how he himself practices and thinks.

The reason for recalling death and impermanence

One of the chief factors that is motivating Shantideva to do this revelation of faults or confession is the remembrance of death and impermanence. Our death is definite but the time of our death is indefinite. When the time of our death comes, which it certainly will, our body doesn't come with us. Our possessions and money don't come with us. Our friends and relatives, status and awards are all left behind.

The only things that come with us at the time of death are the karma that we have accumulated and the mental habits that we've developed. Seeing this – the reality of our own mortality and what it is that really comes with us at our death – then when we look back on our life, at what we spent our time doing, we are full of regret.

We spend an incredible amount of time dwelling in a very negative state of mind for the sake of people or objects but at the time of death, they all get left behind. All the karma we created in relation to them – from being attached to them, from being jealous of other people having more of them than we do, from being resentful and angry with them when they interfere with our happiness – all that negative karma comes with us.

Thinking about that, we feel a sense of horror and a sense of: "Woh! I've set my priorities all wrong in my life and I'm seeing it now for the first time. I want to set my priorities correctly now because this life is very precious and when I get to the time when I'm dying, there's no rerun button to push to go back in time and live my life again."

When the time of death comes, we're going. It doesn't matter how rich you are, how well-connected you are, how many doctors are around you or how many family members there are crying and begging you not to die.

At that time, there is no choice because our body is failing. Our mind is absorbing and becoming more subtle because the body can't sustain it. We're going on to the next life with some karma ripening.

Understanding this now helps us to think seriously about what is valuable in our life so that we live everyday in a very meaningful way. If we live everyday very meaningfully, then when the time of death comes, there is no regret and there is no fear. We've practiced well and we haven't created a ton of negative karma, so there will be no regret and no fear.

For the realized practitioners, dying is like going on a picnic

They say that for the very realized and excellent practitioners, dying is like going on a picnic. These people actually have a very good time dying.

When Kyabje Ling Rinpoche, my abbot who gave me my monastic ordination died, he stayed in meditation for thirteen days. His body was sitting upright. The body heat has left the limbs but there was still a little bit of heat at the heart area indicating that his subtle consciousness had not left the body yet. He stayed like that meditating on the ultimate nature of reality for thirteen days!

I think for Ling Rinpoche, that was probably better than a picnic. That kind of meditation is so blissful. He must be feeling so much happiness from being able to make his life meaningful. There is no fear whatsoever because there is no negative karma hanging around waiting to ripen. So death is totally okay and even enjoyable.

It is for this purpose that Shantideva is giving us all this advice – so that we can die in a very good way, have a good rebirth and be able to continue practicing the Dharma in future lives, so that we can keep on purifying our mind, accumulating positive potential, studying the Dharma, practicing it and progressing along the path.

So let's keep in mind why we're talking about death. Some people think: "Talking about death is so morbid! Don't talk about it because then it might happen." As if if you don't talk about death, it might not happen. Is that true? No. Death is going to happen whether we talk about it or not. So we might as well talk about it so that we are prepared when it happens.

It's not like death gets planned and everything is properly laid out. We don't have a ready made script for dying that we have rehearsed the whole time. For advanced practitioners, yes, they've done that. There's a whole meditation that they know how to do at the time of death. They do the meditation and have control over their death process. But for the rest of us, death can come at any moment and we can't say: "Excuse me but I'm really busy today. Could I die next week instead?" We can't do that. It's there. We have to deal with it.

We'll continue with the text. Shantideva's giving us advice and sharing with us how he thinks:

Chapter 2 Verse 40:

40. Although lying here on a bed and relying on relatives, I alone have to bear the feeling of being cut off from my vitality.

So there you are, lying on the bed. You're relying on your relatives to feed you or being nearby. However, no matter how many people there are in the room, we die alone and we go through all the experiences of the sensations of dying alone. Even if somebody else in the room is dying, they're not sharing our experience. They're having their own experience.

Chapter 2 Verse 41:

41. For a person seized by the messengers of Death, what good is a relative and what good is a friend? At that time, merit alone is a protection, and I have not applied myself to it.

At the time of death, what good is it having friends and relatives? What can they do for you? They can't take away your fear and misery when you are dying. In fact having friends and relatives around when we are dying may make it more difficult.

Imagine: you are dying and the people whom you care about are all crying hysterically. You're trying to take refuge, meditate on emptiness but the people you care about are crying. Is that going to be nice? No. Your friends and relatives are just going to be a big disturbance. You're going to want to say: "Hey look! Go out of the room. If you're going to cry, go somewhere else."

Many years ago, I was helping one young Singaporean man who was dying from cancer. We talked about his death and he told his sister who was taking care of him that if she got upset while he was dying, to please leave the room. And she was very respectful of that.

So if you're ever with somebody who's dying, pay attention to them and try and help them. Don't just sit around and get emotionally upset because it doesn't help anybody in the situation. If you feel like you can't control at that moment, then leave the room and process your emotions somewhere else. Let the environment in the room of the dying person be peaceful.

Shantideva is saying that friends and relatives aren't useful at the time of death. What is useful is our merit and our positive potential, but while we have the time to create it, we were busy doing other things.

I've always thought that we could write a book called 'The four zillion, nine hundred and fifty-seven million, five hundred and forty-nine thousand, one hundred and thirteen excuses why I can't practice the Dharma'. Maybe if somebody has a few more, I can add in case I didn't get them all?

We have so many reasons why we can't purify our negative karma, why we don't have time to create virtue. We have excuses like: 'I have to eat breakfast', 'I have to water the plants', 'I have to clean the house' or 'I have to go in and work overtime'. We have so many excuses and yet at the time of death, all of those are worth nothing. If we didn't create positive potential, we just won't have it to take with us at the time of death.

So it's important to do our practice now while we have the opportunity to make that a priority in our life. Do not let all the very silly, mundane things distract us.

What are the things that are usually distracting us? The eight worldly concerns. We talked about these yesterday, remember? Attachment to pleasant sensual sensations and aversion to unpleasant ones; attachment to approval and praise and aversion to criticism and blame; attachment to having a good reputation and aversion to having a bad one; attachment to our money and possessions and aversion to losing them.

All these eight concerns are just centered around the happiness of this life and very focused on *me*, the center of the universe. When we spend our time chasing them, we don't have anything to show at all at the end of the day because all these eight stay here and meanwhile we're going on to the next life.

Chapter 2 Verse 42:

42. O Protectors, I, negligent and unaware of this danger, have acquired many vices out of attachment to this transient life.

This is what we were saying – unaware of our own mortality, unaware of the fact that death can happen at any time, out of attachment to this very transient life that goes by so quickly, we've created a great stock of negative karma.

Chapter 2 Verse 43-46:

43. One completely languishes while being led today to have the limbs of one's body amputated. Parched with thirst, and with pitiable eyes, one sees the world differently.

44. How much more is one overpowered by the horrifying appearances of the messengers of Death as one is consumed by the fever of terror and smeared with a mass of excrement?

45. With distressed glances I seek protection in the four directions. Which good person will be my protection from this great fear?

46. Seeing the four directions devoid of protection, I return to confusion. What shall I do in that state of great fear?

Let's say there is a person who is seriously injured and has to have all four limbs amputated. That person's going to be terrified, especially if they have to undergo the surgery without any kind of anesthetic. So they're going to be 'parched with thirst'. 'With pitiable eyes', they are terrorized by that prospect.

And that's just having your arms and legs cut off. If that's terrifying, then think of what's going to happen at the time of death when we're leaving everything behind, not just our arms and legs but our whole body and even our whole ego identity.

We have this whole concept of who we are: "I am this person, therefore such and such is going to happen and this and that is going to be expected." We have all these images of ourselves based on how we fit into a certain environment. However, at the time of death, the environment and all these images evaporate because we don't take our body with us to the next life. We don't take our social standing with us. We don't take our flat with us. We're going on without any of the things that usually give us some identity.

Imagine how frightening this is going to be at the time of death if we haven't practiced, when we have to give up everything including our identity. There we are searching around for help, looking in the four directions, looking everywhere, looking for somebody who can help us.

But there are no friends or relatives who can take this misery away from us. Why? Because when we had the time to do the practice that will prevent this misery, we were too busy chasing pleasure. We were too busy retaliating against our enemy. So at that very last moment, there's nothing there that can help.

As much as we are crying out for help, what can a friend or relative do? At the most, they might remind us of our spiritual mentor. They can tell us to take refuge. They can guide us on a purification meditation, the taking and giving meditation or a meditation on emptiness. They can ask us to remember those things, but if during our life, we haven't had any familiarity with those practices, even though our friends and relatives may remind us at the time of death, we're not going to remember how to do the practices.

While we're alive and people give us advice and encourage us to listen to and practice Dharma teachings, we ignore the advice. Then at the time of death, we go: "What's going to happen!?" That happens because of our ignorance, not taking the wise advice that we've received.

I remember one time there was one young man who was dying of cancer. He asked me for a meditation practice to do so I contacted my teacher who was able to prescribe a very specific practice for him to do. I called him up and said: "Come over and I'll teach you this meditation practice. This could be very effective in curing your illness." But he said to me: "Well, I'm back at work. I feel better and I don't have any time now."

I knew if you have a cancerous brain tumor, you need to do some serious practice. Otherwise there's not going to be a good prognosis. Here I was having the tools to help him but he told me he didn't have time. I knew that after some time, his condition would worsen and he might even die, and he'll come to me for help, but what can I do at that time?

And in fact, that's what happened. Several months later, the tumor flared up. He had to stop working. He died. I was there at that time and I was helping him as best as I could. But at the time when I really could have helped him, he was too busy.

We may not have a brain tumor now, but we are all similarly in the process of dying, because as soon as we are conceived in our mother's womb, ageing starts and death begins to approach. It's not like we're living and then something called ageing happens accidentally and death comes as a surprise.

From the very moment that we're conceived in our mother's womb, ageing starts and it's all headed towards death. There is no way to avoid it. Don't think that because you're healthy, this advice doesn't pertain to you. Remember the verse we read yesterday that said that death doesn't wait for tasks done or tasks undone? It just comes when it will.

So looking in all the directions, we're not finding any protection and we're becoming confused. And Shantideva says: "What shall I do in that state of great fear?" Having wasted one's precious human life and having created a lot of negative karma, not having practiced, not having purified, what do we do now? Death is approaching. What do we do? There's no quick fix. There's no pill to take at that moment that purifies our negative karma.

At this point, his mind is beginning to change. Seeing that there is nothing that friends and relatives can do to help him, he says:

Chapter 2 Verse 47:

47 Right now I go for refuge to the Protectors of the World whose power is great, to the Jinas, who strive to protect the world and who eliminate every fear.

'The Protectors of the World' refers to the Buddhas. 'Jinas' means the Conquerors, those who have conquered their defilements.

How does the Buddha eliminate fear? Does the Buddha eliminate fear by getting rid of all the things that we're afraid of? No. Getting rid of fear does not mean separating from all the things that we're afraid of, because that's impossible. Where are you going to go where you're completely free of everything you are afraid of? Rather, becoming fearless means transforming our own heart, transforming our own mind. If our heart and mind are transformed, then no matter what circumstances we're in, we're not going to be afraid.

How does the Buddha protect us and stop our fear? By teaching us the Dharma so that we know how to control our own mind and how to work with our moods and thoughts. If we know how to do that, practice doing that and are well trained in doing that, then we're not going to have any fears. If anger comes up, we know to meditate on patience. If attachment comes up, we know to meditate on impermanence. If jealousy arises, we know it's time to meditate on rejoicing. We know what to do. We're familiar with the antidotes. So then there won't be any fear.

Chapter 2 Verse 48:

48. Likewise, I earnestly go for refuge to the Dharma that is mastered by them and that annihilates the fear of the cycle of existence, and to the assembly of Bodhisattvas as well.

Verse 47 is taking refuge in the Buddha. Verse 48 is taking refuge in the Dharma and in the Sangha. Here the Sangha refers to the bodhisattva Sangha.

Chapter 2 Verse 49:

49. Trembling with fear, I offer myself to Samantabhadra, and of my own will I offer myself to Manjughosa.

Seeing that the time of death is here and that there is nothing to hold on to from this life, we completely offer ourselves to these high bodhisattvas. By offering ourselves, what we're saying is: "I offer myself to do what will please you."

What is it that will please the Buddhas and bodhisattvas? Our Dharma practice.

Chapter 2 Verse 50-53:

50. Terrified, I utter a mournful cry to the Protector Avalokita, whose conduct overflows with compassion, that he may protect me, someone who has done wrong.

51. Seeking protection, I earnestly invoke noble Akasagarbha, Ksitigarbha, and all the Compassionate Ones.

52. I bow to Vajri, upon the sight of whom the messengers of Death and other malevolent beings flee in terror to the four directions.

53. After neglecting your counsel, in terror I go to you for refuge now as I face this fear. Swiftly remove my fear!

'Avalokita' is Kuan Yin. 'Vajri' is Vajrapani.

Shantideva is saying: "After spending years of my life not paying any attention to the advice of the Buddha, now when I'm afraid, I'm going to you for refuge, so please, as much as you can, help me!"

Sometimes we do this a lot. People offer us very good and wise advice but we totally ignore it. And then when we get in a difficult space, we run to them for help.

For example, you come to Buddhist teachings like this one and you hear Shantideva say: "Look, you're going to die. You don't know when death is. At the time of your death, your merit and your practice are what's most important to you."

Shantideva and the Buddha are giving us incredibly wise advice, but we somehow feel that the advice is a little too extreme: "What are you talking about? I'm young. I'm not going to die for a while. I have control over when I'm going to die. If I get sick, I can just go to the doctor and the doctor will cure me. We have all these advancements in medical science; they should be able to keep me alive. So why are you doing this big trip about encouraging me to practice the Dharma? I mean why can't I go out and have a good time?"

This is how we think, right? We totally ignore the advice of the Buddha. However, if we go to a fortune teller, and the fortune teller says: "Oh, you're going to get sick this year!" Then we're terrified: "Oh no, I'm going to get sick. I'd better go practice the Dharma. I'd better do some purification quick! What do I do?"

Look how foolish we are. Here's the Buddha, somebody who is omniscient, whose mind knows things as they are. The Buddha gives us advice but we say: "What does this guy know anyway?" But when a fortune-teller who doesn't have spiritual realizations tells us we're going to get sick, we go: "I believe you. I'll do anything you say!"

Isn't that pretty stupid on our part? Why are we listening to the fortune-teller instead of the Buddha? I have an idea about why that happens. I'll tell you. I'll tell you a story of how I learnt this.

One time in Spokane, which is the major city near the Abbey, there was some kind of New Age Fair or something. The Abbey was offered a free booth, so I came with a few other Dharma practitioners. We displayed some Dharma books at the booth. We set out and we were ready to talk with people about the Buddhist teachings.

The booths to my right and left both have fortune-tellers and psychics. Now whether people who claim to be psychic are really psychic, I have no idea. Even if they are psychic, whether their psychic powers are accurate, I don't know.

But anyway, there I was, sandwiched between two psychics. At our booth, we have the Buddhist books displayed on the table. People kind of walked by, looked and kept walking. And mind you, we don't charge anything for the books. At the Abbey, we don't charge for anything. We live completely on donations. So there we were, ready to give books out; we weren't charging anything. People didn't come.

The psychics on either side, they were charging I don't know how much, but quite a bit of money, to give you a half-an-hour or 20-minute consultation. I watched the people who went to the psychics. They would sit there and look at the fortune-teller with single-pointed concentration. No distraction. They weren't looking around or looking at the time. They were just looking at the fortune-teller, totally engrossed.

Do you know why? Because the fortune-teller was talking about them specifically.

"Somebody is talking about *me*. Well this person must be smart, they finally realized that I'm the center of the universe. At least somebody realizes how important I am and they're talking just about me. And I am so fascinated by it."

And I watched this. People would pay who knows how much money for that, because it was all about *me*. They had such trust in the fortune teller who is a worldly person. The Buddha is freely giving advice and teaching simply out of compassion, but they think: "He's not talking specifically to me about me – not very interesting."

Is this the way we are? Yes. Is it any surprise we are in cyclic existence? No. With that kind of attitude, what kind of karma are we creating? We are not creating the karma to be liberated from cyclic existence.

It's a good thing there are no psychics on either side of me right now, otherwise I'll be talking to an empty hall; you'd all be waiting in line to see the psychics. [laughter] Joking. Maybe not joking. [laughter]

Chapter 2 Verse 54-55:

54. Even one frightened by a fleeting illness would not disregard the physician's advice; how much more so one afflicted by the four hundred and four diseases,

55. Of which just one can annihilate all people living in Jambudvipa, and for which a medicine is not found in any region.

Even when you just have a cold or a flu, you follow the doctor's advice closely. What then of somebody who is suffering from the great disease of ignorance? This ignorance is the source of all of our physical diseases and all of our mental problems. There's no magic pill that a doctor can give us to cure ignorance. Since we now have a spiritual guide who could advice us on what to do, shouldn't we follow it conscientiously?

If we follow a doctor's advice about a cold or flu that's certainly not going to kill us, then shouldn't we follow the guidance of the Buddha who is the supreme physician who will show us how to cure the disease of ignorance?

Chapter 2 Verse 56:

56. If I disregard the counsel of the Omniscient Physician who removes every pain, shame on me, extremely deluded one that I am!

'The Omniscient Physician' refers to the Buddha.

Shantideva is saying: "If I have the opportunity to learn teachings from the Buddha which can eliminate all the pain from all of my lives forever but I disregard that advice, then I'm very foolish. Shame on me! Aren't I deluded!"

Chapter 2 Verse 57:

57. If I stand very attentive even on a smaller cliff, then how much more so on an enduring chasm of a thousand leagues?

If you're standing on a small cliff, for example, you will be very vigilant, won't you? You will watch everything you're doing. You will not be reckless. If you're that vigilant when it's just a small cliff, wouldn't you be even more vigilant if it's a huge cliff?

We could even just be talking about the edge of the stage. We're careful when we get to the edge of the stage so we don't fall down and hurt our knee. If we're careful about that, then what about standing on the cliff of death, ready to fall down into the lower rebirths? Shouldn't we be very vigilant at that moment? Shouldn't we take great care? Shouldn't we follow any advice that would help us and prevent us from falling into that chasm of the lower realms? Certainly we should listen to the Buddha's advice.

Chapter 2 Verse 58:

58. It is inappropriate for me to be at ease, thinking, "Just today death will not arrive." The time when I will not exist is inevitable.

We always feel that death is not going to happen to us yet. We wake up in the morning and we think: "Death is not going to happen today." In fact we never even bother to think that death will not happen today. We just assume it won't. But do we know for sure? No.

If you think about it, since morning time today in Singapore, many people have died. There're many hospitals in Singapore. There're people who have died today. But when those people woke up this morning, they probably didn't think that they would die today. Even people who are very sick with a terminal illness always feel: "Later. Death will come later. I still have a little bit more time."

This is our foolishness. If we woke up in the morning and we thought: "Today could be the last day of my life," then we would be very vigilant. We would make good decisions. We wouldn't be flippant and trivial. We

wouldn't get involved with negative thoughts because who wants to get involved with negative thoughts on the day you're dying? We wouldn't get involved with craving things and being obsessed with things. Who wants to cultivate attachment on the day they die? Doing that doesn't help.

This mindfulness of our own mortality is very good in helping us remain in a positive mental state.

I notice this myself. Some years ago, I was studying with one of my teachers, Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey. Geshela was teaching Arya Deva's text, 'The Four Hundred Verses' which has a whole chapter just about impermanence and death. Everyday for quite a number of days or weeks, Geshela would teach some verses about impermanence and death. Every evening I would go home and review what he taught and meditate on it, so the awareness of impermanence and death was very strong in my mind at that time.

As a result, my mind became very peaceful. Why did my mind become peaceful thinking about death and impermanence? Because I thought: "If I'm going to die, why do I want to waste my time getting angry at somebody? If I'm going to die, why waste my time with a lot of craving and attachment?"

So I stopped getting irritated with my neighbor who played her radio too loud because I thought if I died, I didn't want to worry about her radio. I don't want to be thinking about her radio if I only have a little bit of time left to live.

If we look at all those mundane problems that so often weigh on us, that we ruminate about, we will see that they actually concern very small things. If we knew that we were going to die today, we wouldn't want to spend our time thinking about them at all because these itty-bitty things are of absolutely no consequence.

So if we have that awareness and we let these things go, then we will be able to focus our mind instead on things that are useful, for example, doing some confession, apologizing to people whom we've harmed, forgiving the people who have harmed us, generating love and compassion, developing our wisdom. There're so many useful and meaningful things we can do. As a result, our mind gets very peaceful. Very calm.

Chapter 2 Verse 59:

59. Who can give me fearlessness? How shall I escape? I shall certainly not exist. Why is my mind at ease?

Shantideva's saying: "Death is definite. How do I stop being afraid? At the time of death, my present ego identity is finished. How can I escape from this fear?" The continuity of our mindstream goes on. We have this whole conception of ourselves: "I am so and so. This is my name. These are my relatives. This is my job. This is where I live. This is what I like. This is what I don't like. This is how people should treat me." At the time of death, all these ego identities that we have – they're finished. Gone!

That's what he means when he says: "I shall certainly not exist." He doesn't mean that the continuity of consciousness stops. What he means is this whole ego identity that is attached to this life completely evaporates. We can see that we're totally unprepared for that.

At the time of death, we're probably going to have a lot of craving for our life and a lot of grasping at our next rebirth once we realize that we can no longer stay with this one. Those two mental factors of craving and grasping are what cause our karma to ripen.

When you study the twelve links of dependent origination which talks about how we cycle in samsara, in cyclic existence, those two mental factors are the chief ones that make karma ripen. One is the mental factor of craving at the time of death that doesn't want to separate from this body, doesn't want to separate from this ego identity. The second is grasping which grasps at the next rebirth once we realize we can no longer stay with this one.

In particular, if we have a lot of regret and our mind is overwhelmed by fear, it's not likely that there's going to be a good karma that ripens at that moment. On the other hand, if we're able to take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha and think of their virtuous qualities, think of love and compassion or meditate on emptiness, our mind will be in a virtuous state and it'll be much easier for some positive karma to ripen which will propel us to a good rebirth.

Of course we want to stop the whole cycle of rebirth, but if we're not at the point where we can do that, then at least let's get a good rebirth so that we're able to continue doing our Dharma practice in the future. If we get a bad rebirth, it's going to be very difficult to practice the Dharma.

I have two cats at home. My cats have heard so many Dharma teachings. At the beginning when we started the Abbey, we didn't have a meditation hall. All the teachings were given in the living room, so the cats came for the Dharma teachings. They've heard about the precepts, about not creating negative karma so many times. They've heard so much advice about not killing. But when they go outside and they see a little mouse or a chipmunk, they charge at it. There they go. No matter how much I explain to them: "You shouldn't kill because other living beings want to stay alive just like you do," they find it very difficult to understand.

So if we have that kind of rebirth, how are we going to practice the Dharma? Look at my cats. They have a very fortunate rebirth. They're well fed. They're very comfortable. They even hear Dharma teachings. Quite fortunate. But it is very difficult to practice with the level of intelligence of an animal. We don't want to wind up with that kind of rebirth.

Chapter 2 Verse 60:

60. What of value has remained with me from earlier experiences, which have disappeared, and engrossed in which I neglected the counsel of spiritual mentors?

We've had so many past experiences. They're all gone now. They're just like last night's dream. They're just memories. But when we were involved in them, when we were engrossed in them, we totally forgot all the wise advice our Dharma teachers gave us.

Does that ever happen to you? Your mind gets completely overwhelmed by ignorance, desire or anger and resentment. When the mind is feeling some negative emotion very strongly, do we remember the Buddha's advice? When there's some object that you badly want to get, do you ever think about the disadvantages of attachment? No. All we can see is how wonderful that is – how much we want it, how much we need it. We got to have it. We can't live without it. Buddha's teachings – out the window!

Even if a Dharma friend comes and says: "You know, looks like you're having some problem with attachment," we go: "I'm not attached! I need this!" We just don't understand.

What about the occasions when we were very angry? Our mind is overwhelmed by anger. Do we remember the Buddha's advice to practice patience then? No. We're just focusing on: "That person did this. How dare they! I can't believe it. Oh this idiot!" We sit there telling ourselves the same story again and again about how awful this person was. It doesn't matter that we've listened to Dharma teachings for years. At that moment – gone! All we can think of is how angry we are and how we wish that person will suffer a lot 'after what they did to me!' That's all we can think of.

That's what Shantideva is saying in this verse. We were completely engrossed in these situations and we neglected the advice of our spiritual teachers. But what of value has remained from those situations? What do we have to show from them? Even if we got revenge on our enemy, so what? Even if we got our object of attachment, so what? None of those things are here now. All we have is the negative karma.

Chapter 2 Verse 61:

61. Upon forsaking my relatives and friends and this world of the living, alone I shall go elsewhere. What is the use of all my friends and enemies?

In other words, why do I spend so much energy being attached to my friends and harming my enemies if none of that has any lasting value or meaning? Why? What's the purpose?

Chapter 2 Verse 62:

62. In that case, only this concern is appropriate for me day and night: How shall I surely escape suffering on account of that nonvirtue?

Shantideva's saying that the most important thing we should think about day and night is how to purify this negative karma so that it doesn't ripen and bring the suffering results that will definitely come if the karma is not purified.

Chapter 2 Verse 63-65:

63. Whatever vice, whatever natural misdeed, and whatever misdeed by prohibition I, an ignorant fool, have accumulated,

64. Terrified of suffering, all this I confess, standing with folded hands in the presence of the Protectors and bowing repeatedly.

65. May the Guides be aware of my transgressions together with my iniquity. O Protectors, may I not commit this evil again!

There're different kinds of vices or negativities. There is a type of negativity that is translated here as 'natural misdeeds'. These are naturally negative actions, which means that just about any ordinary being who does them is doing them with a harmful motivation and will thus accumulate negative karma. These are the ten unwholesome actions – killing, stealing, unwise sexual behavior, lying, creating disharmony, harsh words, idle talk, coveting, ill will and wrong views. These are all naturally negative actions. We should confess all of these, because almost any time an ordinary being does them, they lead to harm.

Another type of negativity is called a misdeed by prohibition. These are negativities we've accumulated not because the action is naturally negative but because the Buddha made a precept against doing this and we've ignored the precept. An example is the drinking of alcohol. It's not a naturally negative action, but because the Buddha prohibited it as he thought that it leads to a lot of problems, then if we drink the alcohol, we're breaking that advice, that precept of the Buddha and so that becomes a misdeed by prohibition.

Shantideva says: "Not wanting to suffer, either at the time of death or in my future lives, I confess all these misdeeds that I, an ignorant fool, have accumulated. I'm not going to hide them. I'm not going to rationalize them. I'm not going to justify them. I'm not going to blame others. I'm not going to make excuses. I'm owning that these are faults that I've committed."

And you know what? Whenever we can own our own faults and have a deep sense of regret, our mind is liberated from all the feelings of remorse and guilt. There is a tremendous feeling of relief that comes when we're able to completely own our negative actions and stop blaming others for them.

As long as we are rationalizing, justifying, defending ourselves saying somebody else made us do it or it's somebody else's fault, then our mind is not going to be at peace because we know deep down what the truth of the situation is.

The more we lie to ourselves, the more we're harming ourselves. Whereas the more we can own that these were negativities that I did and we have genuine regret and the determination not to do them again, then the more we're able to put those negativities down. Our mind becomes very peaceful, because we're no longer afflicted by guilt and remorse.

This is what Shantideva's advising us to do. He is saying: "All these I confess, standing with folded hands". With our palms together, we bow repeatedly in the presence of the protector Buddhas. We're not just standing there whimpering; we're bowing. And when you bow, you're really putting your body in motion and it has a very visceral effect.

In the Tibetan tradition, when we do prostrations that accompany confession, we do full-length prostrations where our whole body is on the floor and our nose is there in the dirt. It's so good for the mind because we really let go of all our pride, all our conceit, all our defensiveness. We throw them out the window! Somehow

the physical motion of doing the prostrations and bowing to the Buddha helps us to genuinely feel in the depth of our heart the confession that we're making.

We also make the request: "May the guides," in other words, the Buddhas and bodhisattvas, "be aware of my transgression together with my iniquity. O Protectors, may I not commit this evil again!" We're asking the Buddhas and bodhisattvas to be witness to our confession and to have some compassion for us. In their presence, we are making a very strong determination to avoid doing those kinds of harmful actions again. All of these are very psychologically healing and spiritually purifying. It's really quite a wonderful practice.

So that's Chapter Two.

Questions and Answers

[Audience:] What are the differences among the Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions of Buddhism?

[Ven. Chodron:] Whenever I'm asked questions like that, I like to say instead what their similarities are. Rather than look at the differences, I think it's much more helpful for us to be aware of the common points between the various Buddhist traditions so that we respect all of the traditions and we respect the practitioners of the various traditions.

It's important for us to know that all of these Buddhist traditions are based on the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. They all talk about rebirth and the importance of purifying and accumulating positive potential. They all talk about developing love and compassion, forgiveness and kindness. They all talk about understanding selflessness and letting go of clinging to a false notion of the self. All these Buddhist traditions share the same basic principles. The meditations may be slightly different. Sometimes there're philosophical differences, but those are much too extensive to go into in a short answer like this. And like I said, it's important that we see that all these teachings come from the Buddha.

Also, it's important to know that the Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana are not three different kinds of Buddhism. For example, somebody who practices the Mahayana must also practice the Theravada teachings. Somebody who practices the Vajrayana must also practice the Mahayana and the Theravada teachings. Don't think that these practices are all separate. Actually they include one another.

[Audience:] In the Tibetan tradition, what is the proper ritual to do when death occurs?

[Ven. Chodron:] It's not so much about ritual. It's about how you practice. I say this because sometimes people can get very involved in rituals and do a ritual for the sake of a ritual but not use the ritual to change their mind. The purpose of any ritual is to change our mind. We do not do rituals for rituals' sake. That's not meaningful at all.

So I'd like to reword this question to: **What is the proper way to think when somebody is dying? What is beneficial to do when somebody is dying?**

Let's start off with the scenario of somebody dying and we happen to be with them.

- Like I was saying before, don't be crying in the room and making a big fuss.
- Try and help that person beforehand to settle all of their worldly issues, in other words, to write a will, to give away as much of their property as they can because they can't take them with at death. It's very good for them to create positive potential or merit by being generous before they die and giving away their possessions.
- Encourage them to forgive the people they need to forgive and to apologize to the people they need to apologize to.
- Keep the room very peaceful. Don't have the television on.

- If you're with somebody who's a Buddhist, remind them of their spiritual teacher. Remind them to take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. Have them look back on their life and remember their kind deeds and rejoice in them. Lead them in cultivating love and compassion for other beings. Remind them about bodhicitta. Remind them that whatever appears to them in the dying process and in the intermediate stage are all only appearances, so there is no need to get too reactive to these things but to just see them as appearances.

So you remind them of the Dharma in an attempt to make their mind remember.

- After their breath has stopped, it's very helpful if you have a blessed pill to crush it, mix it with a little bit of honey and put in on the crown of their head. You could do that right before their breath stops or right afterwards. This helps their consciousness leave through the crown of their head which is beneficial for their next rebirth.
- Keep the room very quiet. Do some meditation in the room. Do some chanting.
- For as long as you can, don't move the body. When you do have to move it, then first touch the crown of the head and tell the person to be born in the pureland or to take a precious human life. After you have done that, then move the body.

So these are things that are good to do when you're with somebody who's dying.

When we're dying, then the thing to do is to train our own mind in these same things.

- Remember the Dharma teachings that we've had. Take refuge. Generate bodhicitta. Whatever meditation practice that you are familiar with in your life, do that at the time of death.
- Motivate strongly: "Wherever I am reborn, may I be reborn near perfectly qualified Mahayana teachers. May I have the sense to follow their advice. May I have conducive conditions for practice. May I practice well and make my future lives beneficial for sentient beings." Make these kinds of aspirations while you're still able to think. Set your intention and set your motivation for what you want to do as you're going through the death process.
- As visions appear to your mind, to remember that they are empty of inherent existence. They're only appearances. There's nothing to get reactive about. In that way you can keep a calm mind.
- If you've been doing a practice such as meditation on Chenrezig (Kuan Yin), Manjusri or other deities, then meditate on that particular Buddhist deity. Think of their qualities and imagine being that deity yourself because if a deity goes through a death process, they're certainly not going to be afraid or worried or clinging and grasping.

Really train your mind by practicing now so that at the time of death, you'll be very familiar with those meditations and it will be easy to do them then. We're very much creatures of habit, so it's important now while we're healthy, while our mind is still clear to set strong habits that we can call upon later on in our life.

[Audience:] What is the difference between self-grasping and self-cherishing?

[Ven. Chodron:] Self-cherishing is what I've been translating as 'self-centeredness'. I don't tend to translate the term as self-cherishing because some people ask: "Well, shouldn't we cherish ourselves?" And you have to agree: "Yes, we should cherish ourselves." But we should cherish ourselves in a healthy way. Being self-centered is not cherishing ourselves in a healthy way. It's being quite selfish.

I'm explaining why I don't use the term 'self-cherishing'. Some people may use it as synonymous with self-centeredness. But for new people that term can be very confusing. That's why I don't use it.

Anyway to answer the question about the difference between self-grasping and self-centeredness:

Self-grasping is the view of ignorance. It's the mind that is clinging on to an inherently existent person. It's a mind that is grasping at all phenomena and persons as existing from their own side with their own nature

independent of everything else. That self-grasping is the root of samsara, the root of cyclic existence. It is what we have to eliminate in order to attain liberation.

Self-centeredness is a little bit different. Self-centeredness is the thought: "I'm the most important one in the world! My happiness matters the most. My suffering is the most immediate one to banish." It's the mind that's centered on ourselves, that's preoccupied with ourselves.

There're gross and subtle forms of self-centeredness. In its gross form, self-centeredness manifests as attachment, anger and these kinds of things. In its subtle form, it manifests as some kind of clinging to our own nirvana, saying: "I want to be liberated from cyclic existence and my own liberation is the most important."

When you're following the Mahayana path and you want to become a fully enlightened Buddha, you want to eliminate both self-grasping and self-centeredness.

You want to overcome self-grasping because in that way, you'll be able to liberate yourself from cyclic existence and develop many capabilities that you'll need to be able to benefit others.

You want to overcome self-centeredness because if you're able to do that then you will have the altruistic intention for the highest enlightenment and you will want to practice the Dharma not only for your own liberation but in order to become a fully enlightened Buddha to help all other sentient beings attain full enlightenment as well.

[Audience:] It is said that to be kind to or have love and compassion for others, we have to first be kind to and have love and compassion for ourselves. What does it mean to be kind to ourselves?

[Ven. Chodron:] Like I was just saying, there are wise ways of loving ourselves and they are confused ways in which we think we're loving ourselves but we're really not. His Holiness the Dalai Lama says: "Even if you're looking for your own happiness now, the best way to do that is by having compassion for others." Why? Because our own happiness is very linked to the happiness of others. The more we can open our heart and generate care, affection and respect for other sentient beings, the more peaceful our own mind is going to be, the happier we're going to be.

So one way to be kind to ourselves is to meditate on love and compassion for all living beings.

Sometimes we think: "Oh, the way to be kind to myself is to go out and buy myself a present." So we go out and spend a lot of money to get ourselves something that we want. We think that's being kind to ourselves.

From the Buddhist perspective, that's not being kind to ourselves because our motivation at that time is just attachment. Whenever we act out of attachment, we're putting negative karmic imprints in our own mind. So how can buying ourselves a present with a selfish attitude and with attachment be considered as being kind to ourselves? In our ignorant, confused way of thinking, we think that's kindness, but it's not. The best way to be kind to ourselves is to let go of that grasping and self-centeredness and turn our mind towards the welfare of all living beings.

[Audience:] What can I do when I come across a cat that is dying from a car accident?

[Ven. Chodron:] Exactly what I just said to do. You can chant for the cat. Any of the chanting is good. You can take out any of the prayers that talk about the gradual path to enlightenment and that outlines the major steps on the gradual path. Read that to the cat or to a human being who's dying so they get the imprint of thinking about all the different steps on the path to enlightenment.

[Audience:] What would you suggest as a good practice for victims of wrong-doers to heal the imploded anger, the disappointment and so forth?

[Ven. Chodron:] Chapter Six in Shantideva's text is on patience and how to deal with anger. My book 'Working with Anger' is entirely plagiarized from Shantideva's work. I would suggest reading either of those books and then practicing those meditations. Really try and work with your mind. Let go of the anger. Try and see the harm you received as the result of your own negative karma and in that way stop blaming the other person.

There's a very good article on my website www.thubtenchodron.org that we just put up last week. It's entitled 'Them'. It was written by one of the inmates, James Hicklin whom I correspond with, so it's under the section 'Prison Dharma'. James was very abused as a child, incredibly abused – put on a burning stove, left out in the snow, humiliated. He had quite a disturbed family life. In this article, he talked about how he began to forgive. In particular, he talked about how he began to forgive his step-mother.

I won't even try to put it in words, but I really refer you to that article on the website because James described it far better than I could. What he did basically is he began to see that everything that happened was a result of his karma and that the people who harmed him were suffering. Instead of focusing on the harm he received, he began to focus on the suffering that these people were experiencing that made them harm him.

Whenever somebody harms us, it's because they're confused and in pain. If we can see their pain and misery, then there's the possibility for compassion to arise in our heart. We realize that that person never meant us harm. They never meant to hurt us. They were so overwhelmed by their own internal pain and so confused about what the cause of happiness is and what the cause of suffering is that they thought that by doing those abusive and harmful actions, it would relieve their own pain. That is what was really going on. But they were very mistaken and were in fact creating the causes of misery for themselves.

When James began to understand this in terms of his own family, he was able to let go and heal the anger. He was able to begin the process of forgiveness and bring his own mind to a peaceful state. He's doing quite remarkable spiritual work even though he's locked up in a prison.

Many people are asking me: **“How can I help somebody else who has such and such a problem?”** I get asked this question a lot. “My sister, my brother, my mother, my friend, somebody I care about has this problem. How can I help them get over their problem?”

Well, good question. Sometimes we worry so much about the people we care about that we badger them to get over their problem. We give them advice. We may even yell and scream at them to stop creating the causes of their suffering. We may threaten them. We may nag at them. We may do all sorts of things thinking we're being compassionate. But they wind up not even wanting to be around us. Has it ever happened to you?

Well, we have to discern what's going on at that point – are we really trying to help the other person or are we trying to control them? There's a big difference between helping them and controlling them. Are we trying to help them or are we trying to get them to do what we want them to do? Even if our advice is good, even if our solution is favorable, when we want to control somebody else and we're very attached to the outcome, when we want them to act in a certain way or do a certain thing, our mind at that point is overcome by attachment and we're not going to be very skilful in how we deal with them.

That's why sometimes although we think we're being compassionate and caring for them, they wind up wanting to be a hundred miles away from us. All we really do is nag and push and complain about their actions. So we have to look inside and ask ourselves: “Are we really being compassionate? Or are we just trying to get somebody else to do what we want them to do?” There's a big difference there.

When we see that we're trying to get somebody to do what we want them to do, then we need to chill out a bit and recognize that getting somebody to do what we want is not necessarily solving their problem. We can give people advice. We can try and help but they have to be free to make the decisions themselves.

Sometimes I wonder if we get ourselves so obsessed with helping somebody else because we're using it as an excuse to avoid looking at our own mind and practicing the Dharma ourselves. In other words, we're so worried about a friend or a family member who has a problem that we're just spinning around with: “How can I help them?” and so we're not looking at our own mind to see if our mind is virtuous or not, to see if we're acting properly or not. We think we're being compassionate but in actual fact we're distracting ourselves from the practice of developing compassion.

Sometimes when somebody whom we care a lot about is making a mistake, we want them not to make a mistake because their mistake influences us adversely. Do you know what I mean? This is not compassion. We're actually trying to prevent ourselves from having more problems.

To truly be able to benefit somebody, we have to first try and cultivate a good motivation ourselves. Then we ask: "Well, what can I do to help this person with whatever trip their mind is stuck in?" Think of how you work with your own mind when your mind is stuck in that trip. If you're going to give advice to somebody, it's got to be advice that you yourself have practiced. Only if you understand how it works can you share it with the person whom you care about.

You do not help them by saying: "You should do this and that." Rather, you help them by saying: "You know, I had a similar problem one time. I was suffering because of this problem and this is what I did to handle it. This is how I worked with my mind to handle my problem." In order to know that, you not only need to study Buddhist teachings but you also need to do some meditation. How can you advise somebody else how to work with their mind if you don't know how to work with your own mind?

You can see that so much of this comes back to doing a steady practice ourselves so that when situations arise in which we can be of benefit to others, due to our own practice, we'll instinctively know what to say to the other person that will help them deal with their own mind in that situation.

Often, we look for quick fixes: "What do I do?" But it's not so much 'What do I do?' as we have to first balance ourselves emotionally. If we balance ourselves emotionally, then what to do becomes much clearer automatically. To balance ourselves emotionally, we have to have this familiarity with Dharma practice. That familiarity comes from continually practicing, from making some effort on a daily basis.