

**Commentary on
Shantideva's "A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life"
Chapter 3: Adopting the Spirit of Awakening (bodhicitta) - Part 2 of 4
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(lightly edited transcript)**

Cultivating a positive motivation for listening to teachings

Let's take a moment to cultivate our motivation. Think that we will listen and share the Buddha's teachings together this evening so that we can learn the path to enlightenment and then follow the path to enlightenment so that we can become fully enlightened Buddhas for the benefit of all beings. Make your motivation very broad, very big, very comprehensive, and inclusive of all sentient beings, wishing them all the various kinds of happiness and all spiritual realizations.

Developing Equanimity

Last night, we talked a little about developing equanimity, in other words realizing that all sentient beings want to be happy and want to be free of suffering equally, that nobody's happiness was more important than anybody else's and nobody's suffering hurt more than anybody else's.

This is true regarding people we may consider our friends or our enemies or strangers. They are actually all equal in this very important way.

In addition, we are equal to all others in this very important way. In other words, our happiness is not more important than anybody else's and our suffering doesn't hurt more than anybody else's. In one way, this is very obvious. In another way, when we hear it, it's quite an assault on our self-centered egotism, isn't? If we look in our life, we know intellectually that everybody wants to be happy and not suffer, but in our heart when we live our life, who is the most important one? ME! We all feel this, don't we? We try and be polite and nice to other people. We try not to look selfish. But of course when push comes to shove and at the end of the day, who do we care about most? This one – ME.

Being self-centered obstructs our happiness

This self-centered attitude actually becomes a big obstacle to our own happiness. You would think that being selfish would bring about our own happiness. But actually the more self-centered we are, the more problems we have. It's strange but if we really take some time and analyze our own experience, it becomes very clear that the more we focus only on ourselves and look out only for ourselves, instead of being happier, we actually wind up more miserable. Let's look at a few examples of how this works.

Let's say that I am very attached to myself and I like to have a good reputation. I want everybody to like me. Nobody is allowed to not like me because one of the rules of the universe is that everybody has to like me. So I live with my little rule of the universe that everybody has to like me. But my rule of the universe doesn't correspond with reality. The reality is that not everybody likes me. It doesn't mean I am a bad person. It just means that for whatever reason, they don't like me.

But when I am very attached and self-centered, the fact that somebody does not like me drives me nuts! It's like they are breaking a very important rule of the universe. "Everybody should like me. Everybody should say nice things about me. Everybody should praise me to my face, and they should say nice things about me behind my back. They should honor me and respect me and treat me well!"

That's what the self-centered mind does. But then it has nothing to do with the reality, which is that not everybody likes me, and sometimes it even happens that the people who like me don't treat me the way I want to be treated. I don't always tell them how I want to be treated, but they're supposed to read my mind to know. They just don't read my mind very well, so then I get irritated and I get aggravated: "Why are you treating me like that? You should be nicer to me. I mean it's ME after all." So getting quite irritated about the way people treat me.

You can see that in this situation, all that irritation on my part, my feeling offended because people don't treat me the way I think I deserved to be treated – all of that comes due to my self-centered thought. In other words, the problem is not that other people are rude and inconsiderate. The problem is that I unreasonably demand that everybody likes me and treats me well.

Are you getting what I am saying? We don't like to admit it. But we are all in the same boat. We're with friends, we can be honest.

The self-centered mind makes us extremely touchy and easily offended, easily irritated because we are filtering everything that happens through the lens of how it affects the most important person in the world, who just happens to be *me*. When we regard life through that lens, we become very sensitive to every little thing everybody does. This is because it's filtered through the lens of *me*. We become easily suspicious of other people. We don't trust their motivations. We think they are out to get us. We think they're going to cheat us. We think they are being deceptive. We are very suspicious of other people. We take everything very personally.

All of these cause big problems. For example, if I am very self-centered, then any small thing people do, I filter through my lens of *me*. The classic example is, you go to work and somebody at work says: "Good Morning!" And you think: "What do they want from me? They never used to say 'Good Morning!' so enthusiastically. Something must be up. They are trying to manipulate me and get something out of me because they were so friendly and said 'Good Morning' today."

This kind of thing does happen, doesn't it? That has nothing to do with the other person. It's just us being so sensitive to everything.

Or sometimes it might happen that a friend comes and tries to give us some good advice because we may be on the verge of doing something detrimental. But because we are so self-centered, we interpret that person's advice as criticism and we get angry at them. Somebody who is our friend, who cares about us tries to warn us that we're about to make a mistake or that we're about to do something unethical or something like that. But we don't want to listen because we interpret it as them insulting and criticizing us.

Have you ever had that happen where the situation's reversed? You were trying to say something to a friend of yours to protect them and keep them from making a mistake and they got mad at you? Have you ever had that happen? We've had that happen to us. But do we ever think that sometimes when we get mad, it may be the same situation, but in reverse? That they are trying to be kind to us and we are the ones who are not paying attention and getting angry when they're trying to be helpful?

This actually brings up a whole bigger question of how we choose our friends and why we consider somebody a friend. This is a very interesting question. If we look, why do we say

somebody is a friend? Well, because they like me. They have similar interests. They make me laugh. They raise my spirit when I feel down. They praise me. They give me presents. These are all reasons why we like certain people and consider them friends.

We consider some people our enemies because they criticize us. They blame us. They interfere with our happiness. But so often we don't really understand why somebody's doing what they're doing and we misinterpret it. There could be somebody who is actually being quite manipulative but because they say very nice things to us, we just lap it up and we're their friend forever.

You praise me and I will do anything for you. We're like that, aren't we? Are you like that? I am sometimes. If you want to get me to do something, all you have to do is praise me, say nice things about me, I'm a total sucker. Total sucker. "Ohhh...here's somebody who likes me and thinks I am good. Ahhh...they are such a wonderful person; I will do anything for them." I have no discriminating wisdom, completely blinded by my attachment to praise and my attachment to reputation. That usually backfires in one way or another because I lose my wisdom and I make bad decisions.

So do you see how in that case, being self-centered and wanting people to like me cause me to make bad judgments which lead me into difficult situations? Do you see how that works?

In the same way, if there is a friend who comes to me and says: "Chodron, you need to be careful about this, you're speaking a little bit harshly," or "You didn't tell the truth completely," or "You seem to be angry." Somebody points out this kind of stuff to me and I get kind of bristly: "Why are you criticizing me? I am not angry! Stop telling me I am angry and imputing all your rubbish on me!" Here is somebody who is actually, with a kind motivation trying to help me. But I can't hear it because I interpreted it as criticism. So I get bent out of shape and very angry and I speak harshly to somebody who's actually being a true friend and trying to prevent me from doing something that is dangerous or harmful.

Pity Parties

Are any of you like that? NO. I don't think so. I think it must only be me. Poor me! I am the only one who's such a failure. None of you have that same problem. It's only me. Oh! I can't do anything right. I am so depressed!

And then I throw myself a pity party. We talked about pity parties before, didn't we? Do you know what you do when you throw a pity party? The centre of the party is you. You feel sorry for yourself in everything. You feel that you're the worst one in the world. You are the most unlovable one in the world. You do everything wrong and of course can make everything go wrong. Everybody misunderstands you and nobody treats you right. Nobody appreciates you.

And so you have a party. You have your balloons and they all have unhappy faces on them. You play the music at your pity party, and the tune is 'poor me...poor me...poor me...poor me...' and you recite your *poor me* mantra a hundred thousand times. You take out your prayer beads and go (while counting the beads): "Poor me. Poor me. Poor me. I do everything wrong. No one loves me. I do everything wrong. No one loves me." And you recite your *poor me* mantra with single-pointed concentration. You thought you couldn't concentrate. Well you can because when we throw our pity parties, nothing distracts us from our pity party. We just stay totally miserable in our pity party. And then we blame the world for it because everybody else is supposed to know we are depressed and they're supposed to come cheer us up.

Do you do that? You get kind of irritable or depressed but you don't say anything to the people that you stay with like: "I am feeling a little bit down" or "I am in a bad mood today." You just walk around (in a moody way) and in the back of your mind, you want your family members or your friends to come over and say: "Oh how are you? You look sad today. Can I do something for you? I'll serve you breakfast in bed. You're so wonderful."

We are waiting for our family to come and kind of dote on us. But do they? Do they come and dote on us and cheer us up? No, they avoid us. Can you imagine that?! At a time when we feel a little bit down and we can use some encouragement, our family members avoid us. Unbelievable! And we have absolutely no understanding of why they might avoid us. We don't even consider that maybe it has to do with how we walk around the house.

Pom..pom...pom..(walking noisily). You pick up the newspaper at breakfast and say (in a dreary tone): "Hi dear, how are you? Oh kids, be quiet!" You hide behind the newspaper. And then you wonder why your family life isn't everything you thought it was going to be? Do you think maybe it has something to do with you? Do you think maybe there is something we could do to improve our family life? Or are we certain that it is always everybody else's fault? That they don't appreciate us, they are not nice to us, they expect too much from us.

Are you getting some feeling about how our self-centered attitude works? And how it makes us miserable?

Feeling victimized

So often we feel victimized by life. But we are the ones that are making ourselves into a victim. We actually have the ability to change our life experience but we stay so stuck in our self-pity and our self-centeredness that we don't do what we actually can to improve our relationships and to improve our own life. And instead we expect the world to just treat us better. It's completely unrealistic, isn't it? Totally unrealistic.

I'm going to give you a homework assignment. It's to be done between tonight and tomorrow night, and the homework is to try and be kind to the people you live with. Try and go home and smile at the people you live with. Before you open the door to your flat, think: "How fortunate I am to live with people I care about." Be nice to everybody you live with, not just one family member. Just try it. It's an experiment. Just experiment and try being a little bit more cheerful, a little bit nicer, a little bit more helpful especially to the people you don't tend to get along with so well. Just try that and see if it changes the relationship at all. Try it between tonight and tomorrow night.

What I am getting at is that while our self-centered attitude pretends to be our friend and pretends to be looking out for our welfare, in actual fact the self-centered attitude interferes with our happiness.

It interferes with our happiness right now as shown in the examples that I gave.

It also interferes with our future happiness because our future happiness is very dependent upon the karma that we create. Karma just means actions – our mental actions, our verbal actions, our physical actions. What we will experience in the future is dependant upon the actions that we've done in the past. When we are under the influence of the self-centered mind, we often do many harmful actions and we are the ones who will experience the results of these harmful actions.

If we look back in our life, at some of the times when we hadn't kept precepts, times when we've lied to other people, what kind of mental attitude lay behind our lying? It's usually a wish for self protection and self gain, isn't it? A lie to cover up something that might make me look bad. A lie to do something so that I get some benefit that I wouldn't have gotten otherwise. We commit these destructive actions of lying and in the future it brings the result of other people lying to us and even when we speak the truth people still won't believe us. Sometimes it can even result in lower rebirths, very unfortunate rebirths. And all the lying we do is done under the influence of the self-centered mind.

Or we talk badly about people behind their back. Is there anybody here who has never talked badly about others behind their back? It's one of our favorite past-times, isn't it? To sit and criticize other people when they are not there and therefore can't defend themselves. Especially at the work place, we gang up with a few people and we talk bad about that one. And the conclusion of the whole conversation is that the few of us must be the best ones in the world, because everybody else is bad. And we all agree that they are all bad.

We trash people behind their backs. Why do we do that? What kind of mental states motivate us to speak badly about other people behind their back? Sometimes it's jealousy, isn't it? Somebody's really good or they receive some benefit, and we can't stand it! We think that we are the one that is good or that we should have that benefit. So we want to bring them down by talking badly about them behind their back.

Sometimes it's due to our own insecurity. We don't feel so secure, but if we talk badly about somebody else behind their back, we'll feel better and a little bit more secure afterwards because if they are pretty bad then we must be better. It's a rather stupid way to feel confident and secure but we do it.

So we can see that when we talk badly behind people's back, it brings problems in this life because eventually the people that we talk badly about find out and they reciprocate the 'kindness' and talk badly about us behind our back. And then we have all sorts of relationship problems and other people don't trust us.

I know in my case that if somebody comes to me and trashes somebody else – they are not even talking badly about me; they are talking badly about somebody else – if I hear them talking in a very vicious way about somebody else, I don't trust that person because I know sooner or later, they're going to talk that way about me to somebody else.

So when we talk badly about other people behind their back, even our friends lose faith in us and don't trust us. We also create so much negative karma which leads to unhappy rebirths and it leads to us having a lot of conflict in our relationships.

All that is produced by the self-centered mind because we will never say: "Oh, I am going to talk badly about somebody behind their back for the benefit of all sentient beings." That can never be our motivation. Our motivation is always self-centered when we do that. When we really look, we see how this self-centered attitude really imprisons us and keeps us bound in a cycle of constantly recurring problems, keeps us bound in cyclic existence.

Understanding the defects of the self-centered mind, we have to oppose it. But it's very important in the process that we don't hate ourselves for being selfish. Why? Because hating ourselves for being selfish is just indulging in more self-centeredness. It's the same old thing: "I am so self-centered. I'm so bad. No wonder nobody likes me!" We don't want to hate ourselves or beat up on ourselves for being self-centered. What we want to do is to realize that the self-centeredness is not an inherent part of us; it is not part of who we are.

It's something that we can let go of. It's something that we can apply antidotes to and counteract. When we really see the disadvantages of self-centeredness, it gives us some courage to not follow it.

When the self-centered mind comes up and says: "Okay, speak some harsh words to that person," we say to ourselves: "I am going to keep my mouth closed because I know that speaking harshly or making fun of somebody damages me and damages the other person." It's just falling under the influence of the self-centered thought. So we try to oppose it and replace it with the thought that cherishes others.

The thought that cherishes others is very important because when we cherish others we feel happy and they feel happy. Cherishing others, showing kindness to others is really what our whole life is about, isn't it? Ever since we were born, we've experienced kindness from others, and when we can repay that kindness and share kindness with others then we have a feeling of deep satisfaction in our own heart. And other people also feel happy.

I have been talking about the defects of self-centeredness by way of introduction. Tomorrow I will talk a little bit more about the benefits of cherishing others and the kindness of others. Right now, I want to go back to Chapter 3 of our text.

The Text

As I was saying yesterday, this text is written for people who want to become fully enlightened Buddhas and who are in the process of generating the bodhicitta, the aspiration for full enlightenment for the benefit of all beings and who want to do the practices of the bodhisattva.

The first chapter talked about the benefits of bodhicitta.

The Vows of Samantabhadra

The second chapter started talking about how to prepare our mind to generate bodhicitta. It talked about making offerings and paying homage and it also talked about confession and revealing our mistaken actions and purifying them.

Remember we were saying that these are some of the practices of Pu Xian Pu Sa (Chinese name). Samantabhadra is the Sanskrit name.

Chapter 3 continues with some of those practices of Samantabhadra. The first three verses that we covered last night are the verses about rejoicing, where we rejoice in our own and others' virtue, in our own and others' good deeds, goodness and good fortune.

Tonight we'll start with Verse 4, and this is another one of the vows of Samantabhadra. It is the vow or the practice of requesting for teachings.

Chapter 3, Verse 4:

With folded hands I beseech the Fully Awakened Ones in all directions that they may kindle the light of Dharma for those who fall into suffering owing to confusion.

So with hands folded, with our palms together indicating that we really mean what we're saying, we are not being flippant, we are being very sincere.

We beseech the fully awakened ones, the Buddhas in all the directions, meaning all the Buddhas in the entire Universe – up, down, east, west, north, south, the intermediate directions, everywhere.

That they may light the light of the Dharma, they may kindle the light of the Dharma.
'Kindle the light of the Dharma' means to give teachings.

It's important that we receive teachings because in order to gain any realizations, we have to first hear the teachings, think about them and then meditate on them. To receive teachings, we have to first request for teachings. The Buddha doesn't come along and say: "Here I am. I am going to teach you." We have to request, and so the tradition is usually that we request three times for teachings. Or if we want to take refuge or take the five lay precepts, we request and we request more than once.

In other words, we have to put out our energy in order to receive the teachings and receive spiritual guidance. We shouldn't expect our spiritual teachers to be our employees and our servants. But sometimes we do. Sometimes we are a little bit like spoilt babies because I'll hear people say: "Oh! You are giving teachings at 7.30. Can't you give the teachings at 7 o'clock? It's much more convenient for me if the teachings were at 7 o'clock." "Why are the teachings so long? Can you make the teachings shorter? I am busy. I have other things I need to go and do." Or they say: "Oh, you're scheduling the retreat this weekend. That's not a good weekend. Can you make it that weekend? I can come then."

I'm not kidding. I can't tell you the things that students sometimes ask of their teachers, as if our teachers were our servants and should completely do everything in a way that's convenient for us. We really need to overcome that kind of attitude that either takes our teachers for granted or takes the teachings for granted. Or the attitude that expects everything to be on our terms, in the way we want to have it. We should instead cultivate the mind that really sees the preciousness of the teachings and the kindness of our spiritual mentors for teaching us. And because we see the value of the teachings and we earnestly want to receive them, we go and humbly request: "Please teach me."

The more we have that mind that appreciates the teachings and appreciates our teachers, the more we're going to be open and receptive when we hear the teachings. When we have the mind that is like: "Oh well, somebody's there teaching, it's their job teaching and I have nothing better to do tonight and so yeah, I'll go and I hope they give a good talk that's funny. I don't want to be bored to death like I was the last time I went!"

If we have that kind of idea in our mind, will we be very open and receptive? No! Even if the Buddha appeared before us and taught us the Dharma we would find something to complain about or we would be bored, we would be unappreciative. So I think it is very important for us to do some contemplation about this and to really feel it in our hearts so that we are willing to go out of our way to receive teachings. We are willing to go to our teachers and make an offering, knee down and say: "Please teach me." And if we request teachings, we should show up for the teachings.

I say this because I've had it happen to me, where somebody requested teachings, I organized the teachings but the person who requested it didn't come. Unbelievable! But believable – it happened.

It is important to not take the teachings and teachers for granted in order to make our own mind more receptive to the teachings.

'To kindle the light of the Dharma' means to give teachings.

'For those who fall into suffering owing to confusion' – in other words 'Please teach all of us suffering sentient beings who cycle up and down in samsara again and again under the power of our confusion and our ignorance.'

Yesterday somebody came to interview me. She asked: "What have you learnt over these years in your Dharma practice?" And I said: "One of the things I have learnt that I have not completely comprehended yet, that I feel I am just beginning to get some understanding of, is the depth of our ignorance. How deep and persistent our ignorance is."

When I first came to the Dharma, I didn't think I was very ignorant. Okay I didn't know Calculus very well but so what? That's how I defined 'ignorance'.

But then as I began to practice the Dharma and really look at my own mind, I see how many wrong conceptions exist in my mind, and how even if I have the right conception intellectually, I often forget it in my daily life and act under the influence of the wrong conceptions. Seeing how we sentient beings are so ignorant that we don't even realize how ignorant we are. When we see that more and more then compassion for ourselves and for others will arise, because we see how much we suffer under the force of our ignorance and confusion.

When we see that clearly then when we make requests to our teachers to teach the Dharma, there'll be some strong feeling in our heart of: "I have been suffering all this time due to my ignorance and so has everybody else. Please show me the way out of my own ignorance!" When we have that feeling strongly and we request strongly like that, then our mind is so ripe and open to hear the Dharma.

We practice developing that state of mind by reading these verses and trying to meditate as they describe.

Chapter 3, Verse 5:

With folded hands I supplicate the Jinas who wish to leave for nirvana that they may stay for countless eons, and that this world may not remain in darkness.

'Jinas' means the Conquerors, which refers to the Buddhas because they've conquered all the defilements.

This is another one of Samantabhadra's practices. Here we are requesting the Buddhas: "Please don't pass into pari-nirvana; please keep on manifesting in our world." We are requesting the Buddhas: "Please appear in our world in whatever form is suitable to subdue sentient beings' minds. Please manifest in those forms and teach us and guide us. Don't abandon us for your own nirvana."

Of course from the side of the Buddhas, they would never abandon us to remain in their own self-complacent nirvana because the whole reason they attain enlightenment was to be able to benefit us. We don't have to worry about them walking out on us.

But the thing is we walk out on the Buddhas so what this verse is trying to do is to get us to pay attention to the Buddhas and see how precious it is to live in an age where for example Shakyamuni Buddha has appeared and has given teachings, where we can learn those teachings and where Buddhas have manifested in different aspects – some of which we don't always recognize – in order to teach us and guide us. When we see this, we will greatly appreciate the opportunities we have and request them to come and teach. Our own

mind becomes much more supple, much more open to hearing teachings, much more appreciative of the Dharma. That open, receptive mind enables us to gain realizations.

Chapter 3, Verse 6:

May the virtue that I have acquired by doing all this relieve every suffering of sentient beings.

This is Samantabhadra's practice of the dedication of merit. All the virtue that we've acquired by doing all this – 'all this' refers to paying homage to the Buddhas, bowing to them, making offerings, confessing our mistaken actions, rejoicing at our own and others' virtues, requesting the Buddhas and our teachers to teach us, requesting the Buddhas to continue to manifest in the world.

All these preceding practices that we did, all the virtue, the merit, the good karma that we created from that, we're now dedicating. How are we dedicating it? We're dedicating it so that every suffering of every sentient being can be relieved. In other words we are dedicating it so that every sentient being can attain liberation and full enlightenment, so that none of the suffering of cyclic existence can touch them anymore.

Dedicating our virtue is actually a practice of generosity. I will tell you a very touching story. I first came to Singapore in 1987 and I was living here and teaching. There was one man who very kindly sponsored the first printing of my little book "I Wonder Why?" It was very kind of him because he was the one who started it and that book is still in print now.

Anyway one day he came to me and wanted me to explain something about meditation and how to do the different prayers and recitations. So I sat with him and explained all that to him and then at the end I said: "Let's dedicate the merit that we created, and by dedicating the merit, we imagine that we give away all the positive potential, the good karma that we have created and share it with all the other sentient beings. And we really wish that it ripens in their happiness."

And this man, he was so sincere, he looked at me and he said: "I have so little merit. I don't want to give it away!" He was really frightened by having to dedicate the merit. And I said to him: "It's okay, don't worry. When you give your merit, you actually increase it and there is more of it. You don't have to worry about giving it away and not experiencing any good results from it yourself. You will experience the good results."

When we dedicate at the end of our meditation sessions or teaching sessions, we want to have a sense of richness and then share all that virtue with all the sentient beings, really aspiring that it ripens in their ultimate happiness.

The first six verses of Chapter 3 were the continuation of the vows of Samantabhadra that were started in Chapter 2.

Generating the Aspiration to Benefit

With Verse 7, we're going to start a new section where Shantideva is talking about how to transform our mind into an attitude that is most able to benefit sentient beings. In other words, how to open our mind and dream in a very expansive way of how we would like to benefit sentient beings. The purpose of this is to increase our inspiration and our aspiration to be of great benefit and service to other living beings. When we do this, it has the effect of making it easier for us to actually be beneficial.

Sometimes we may encounter situations where we could do something to help somebody but we go: "Hm...I am busy. I don't have time. They don't deserve it. They haven't been nice to me." We have a thousand and one excuses why we can't do something nice for somebody.

When we practice the verses in this book of aspiring to benefit sentient beings, it really turns our mind in that direction and familiarizes our mind with that intention and that makes it much easier when we actually encounter a situation when we could be of benefit to not be lazy, not be lacking in compassion and to spontaneously reach out and help.

So we're going to start these verses now that talk about generating the aspiration to benefit.

Chapter 3, Verse 7:

May I be the medicine and the physician for the sick. May I be their nurse until their illness never recurs.

Think about it. Wouldn't it be wonderful to be a Buddha where you could manifest many different bodies according to what different sentient beings need at any particular time? If somebody needed a doctor, you could appear as a doctor. If somebody needed medicine, you could appear as medicine. If somebody needed a nurse or a care-giver, you could appear as that caregiver. Wouldn't it be wonderful if you could actually do that? And actually be happy to take care of all these people who were sick? Wouldn't it be nice to have a happy mind that really wanted to take care of people who are sick? Wouldn't it be nice to really wish that they were all cured of their illnesses and those illnesses never recurred again?

This is a practice for us to spend some time on because what this practice does is it counteracts the mind that is sometimes reluctant to help people who are sick.

Have you ever had a relative or a friend in the hospital, you know you should visit them but you don't want to? Have you ever met with that situation? And when you look inside yourself: "Why don't I want to go to the hospital to see them?"

"Well, I might get sick. I might see something really ugly. It's depressing seeing people who are sick. Seeing people who are sick reminds me that I could get sick, and I don't want to be reminded of that. Being in the hospital reminds me that in fact we will all die. I would prefer to ignore that."

Therefore we sometimes come up with all sorts of excuses that prevent us from helping somebody who is sick. Again this is a manifestation of our own self-centeredness and in this case our own fear. By meditating on this verse, by contemplating this verse and just thinking: "How wonderful it would be to have the mind that whenever I saw somebody who was sick, my instinctive reaction was to feel: may they be cured of their illness and their injury. And may I help to bring that about and may I reach out and actually help them." Wouldn't it be nice to have that kind of mental state and overcome our fear, to overcome our selfishness?

I think this verse not only refers to helping people who are physically ill but it also refers to helping people by giving them the Dharma. There is a very common analogy in the Buddhist teaching that the Buddha is like a doctor, the Dharma is like medicine and the Sangha are like nurses.

We are the patient. Our disease is cyclic existence. The virus that is causing our disease is ignorance, self-centeredness, craving, clinging, anger and animosity. The Buddha diagnoses our disease and its causes. He gives the medicine of the Dharma. The Sangha helps us to take the medicine. So this verse can also refer to helping people be free of all the misery of samsara by acting as a Dharma doctor, Dharma medicine and a Dharma nurse.

Chapter 3, Verse 8:

With showers of food and drink may I overcome the afflictions of hunger and thirst. May I become food and drink during times of famine.

Wouldn't it be nice to have your own private jet and tons of food and go to Darfur and provide aid for all the people who are suffering there? Wouldn't it be nice to be able to do so? To be able to have the material wherewithal, to be able to have the skills, to be able to clear away the hindrances from the various rebels that are preventing the people in Darfur from getting food and water? Won't it be nice to be able to go in and give them these basic elements of life?

We think of various beings who are actually suffering from hunger and thirst, right now, as we throw away extra food from our meals. Wouldn't it be nice if we could share food and drink and clothing and medicine and shelter with them? We may start out by writing a check and donating some money for that, but wouldn't it be nice if we could also be personally involved? Go to these places and give them the food with our own hands and give them the water with our own hands? And see how happy they are when they have food and drink? We imagine being able to do these, we develop the aspiration to actually do this.

And not only to take food and drink to these people, but as Buddhas we can even manifest as food and drinks ourselves. So there is no food to be had to bring to people who are starving. May we manifest as food or as water or as beverages, as whatever they need.

Personally speaking, I find these kinds of verses so inspiring, to just sit and think: "Wow I wish that I could do this!" Of course in one way it's a totally impossible wish but you still wish it anyway because bodhisattvas pray even for things that are impossible. The thing is when we aspire for things no matter how far out they are, they release and open our mind, they release the self-centeredness from our mind, open our mind to actually be able to connect with other beings and step out and help them in situations that we encounter in our daily life.

Chapter 3, Verse 9:

May I be an inexhaustible treasury for the destitute. With various forms of assistance may I remain in their presence.

All those who are destitute, all those beings who are poor, who lack even the necessities of life – food, drink, clothing, medicine, shelter – may we become an inexhaustible treasury, where whatever they need, we have and we give to them. Wouldn't that be wonderful, to be able to do that?

'With various forms of assistance may I remain in their presence.' 'Various forms of assistance': some people need doctors. Some people need accountants. Some people need a baby sitter. Some people need to fix a broken joint. Some people need somebody to cook for them. Whatever sentient beings need, may we fulfill their needs and give them what they need so that they don't have to suffer from deprivation and lack.

'May we remain in their presence': may we not just go and give them something and then run back to our flat where we are comfortable, but may we stay with them and help them to go through all the difficulties.

Chapter 3, Verse 10:

For the sake of accomplishing the welfare of all sentient beings, I freely give up my body, enjoyments, and all my virtues of the three times.

'In order to accomplish the welfare of all sentient beings...': in order to not only give them the temporal pleasure in cyclic existence but to accomplish their ultimate welfare, which is leading them to liberation and enlightenment...

In order to do all of that, may we practice perfect generosity, giving our body, giving our enjoyments and giving our virtues.

'Of the three times': our past bodies, enjoyments and virtues, our present body, enjoyments and virtues and every body, enjoyment and virtue that we may have in the future.

To not hold any of these in a self-centered way with a feeling of poverty, but to have an incredibly open, generous heart that wants to give and share all of these in order to accomplish the welfare of all sentient beings.

We may think at first: "Oh yeah, it'd be great to give my body, my enjoyments and my virtues to everybody." But when we start thinking about it a little bit more, we go: "Give my body? Hold on a minute! I want to re-negotiate this verse. Maybe after I am dead you can have my body. I am not so sure I want to give you my body right now. And give you all my wealth and enjoyments? I have to move out of my flat so that you can move in? I don't know if I like that. Give up all my nice clothes, give up my car, give somebody else my MRT pass? I don't know about that! Give up my cell phone – impossible! My cell phone is part of me. It's glued to me."

We not only have five fingers, we also have a hand phone. It's glued to us; we can't separate from it. We also not only have two ears but we also have two ear phones so we can walk down the street with our iPod and tune out the rest of the world. And now you can even have Windows on your cell phone? Oh, we all need to upgrade to that, don't we?

"And then give up SMSing people? Oh no, I can't give that up! Give up my credit card? That's asking too much!"

When we really begin to think about what these verses mean, all of a sudden our self-centered mind rises up and says: "NO! I'll give some things. I'll give what I want to give when I want to give it when it won't inconvenience me and I won't feel any loss from it. That's when I will give. But I don't want to give when it endangers my own happiness. Even if I have two or three cell phones, I'm not going to give one up!"

How many of you have more than one hand phone? How many of you have more than one computer? I always think this is so funny: we have two feet and how many pairs of shoes do we have? Have you ever looked into your closet – how many pairs of shoes you have? And you can only wear one pair at a time! But we don't want to give any of them away!

So sometimes, in the process of generating these aspirational verses, we'll find that the self-centeredness really comes on very strong and we get very miserly, very clinging, very afraid.

When that happens, we have to go back and contemplate the topics that we talked about at the beginning of this talk. In other words, all the disadvantages of self-centeredness. When we think of the disadvantages of self-centeredness, that gives us a lot more courage and determination to not follow it because we see that it's actually something that harms us. And then we think about the benefit of helping others and we really imagine others being happy, and that gives us a lot more inspiration to be able to help them. So we have to go back and think about these things.

Questions and Answers

Q: What's the significance of taking refuge and the five precepts?

VTC: The practice of taking refuge is entrusting our spiritual guidance to the Buddha, Dharma, Sangha and getting very clear in our own mind that we want to be followers of the Buddha and we want to practice the teachings that the Buddha gave. There is a ceremony for taking refuge in the presence of a teacher. It is a short ceremony but it is very nice because it connects us to the whole lineage of teachers going back to the Buddha.

At that time, we also have the opportunity to take some or all of the five precepts, which are to not kill, to abandon stealing, to abandon unwise sexual conduct, to abandon lying and to abandon intoxicants. You can take any or all of the precepts. The precepts act as an incredible protection for our mind because we have already thought about mistaken actions that we could do and we've decided that we don't want to do them, so then when the situation comes up in which to do them, we don't get confused because we've already decided we're not going to lie or steal or do any of those negative actions.

Q: Is there a limit to helping someone?

VTC: I don't think there is a limit to helping people, but we do need wisdom in how to help people. I am interpreting that question as follows: "Well I've helped somebody and then I've helped them again and then I've helped them again, but they just keep making the same mistake again and again and again. They don't follow any good advice and they don't take responsibility for their life. Do I have to keep helping them?"

In that kind of situation, there is no limit to helping somebody but the way you've been helping them needs to change. Let's say you keep giving somebody money to pay off their debts and they keep spending their money unwisely. That's doesn't mean you have to keep giving that person money. You can stop and say: "You don't know how to manage your money wisely. The money I have given you has just been spent here and there so I am not going to give you any more money."

But that doesn't mean that you close your heart and stop helping them altogether. You still keep an open heart and think of other ways that you may be able to help them, like take them to a course on how to manage their personal finances. Maybe that's what they need much more than a loan.

Q: In your book you advice not to move somebody's body after they've died for at least 3 days, in which case wouldn't it be impossible for us to donate our organs?

VTC: I think the whole question of organ donation is something that is up to the individual.

Some people feel very strongly: "I want to donate my organs." In that case, they are very happy if the doctor removes certain of their organs as soon as their breath stops, their heart stops and gives their organs to other people. That's a fine choice. If people feel very strongly that they want to do that, it's really quite wonderful to donate your organs.

Other people may hesitate to donate their organs. I think there can be some good reasons for that hesitation and some not so good reasons. A good reason to hesitate to donate your organ, is if you're concerned that your mindstream may not have left your body at the time the surgeon removes the organ, and that could disturb your own death process. At the time of death, we want the death process to be smooth and not have the consciousness rushed out of the body. We want the consciousness to be peaceful and so on.

So somebody may choose not to donate their organs because they are concerned that maybe it could disturb their own death process. I think that's an okay reason.

Other people may say: "But it's my body! I don't want to give it to anybody." I don't think that is such a good reason because after we've died, we have no use for this body anymore, so we might as well share it with others.

Q: I have a friend who had cancer. He practiced the *tong len* meditation and his sickness got worse. Although it is said that doing this meditation doesn't cause bad effects sometimes it appears to do so. According to the law of attraction, when we want suffering and sickness, our subconscious may help bring this about. What's your opinion?

VTC: *Tong len* which means *taking and giving* is a very powerful meditation where we out of compassion imagine taking on the sufferings of others and with love, we imagine giving our body and enjoyments and virtues to others. It is a very powerful meditation practice where we think of taking others' suffering out of them. The suffering leaves them in the form of pollution, and it becomes like a lightning bolt that strikes at the self-centeredness at our own heart. Remembering that our self-centeredness is our own enemy, we want to abolish it.

We're using the sufferings of others which others don't want to destroy our own self-centeredness which is what we don't want. And then in place of the self-centeredness in our heart, we imagine light and we imagine multiplying our body, possessions and merit and giving them to others.

When we do the taking and giving meditation, we're doing it with complete love and compassion. It's very different than somebody who is overwhelmed by their own self-centeredness and dotes on themselves and who, when they're sick, wouldn't mind feeling a little bit worse so that other people would feel sorry for them and do things for them.

The motivation of somebody doing the taking and giving meditation is completely different than somebody who has the above kind of subconscious wish to be ill.

Therefore no, taking and giving meditation is not going to worsen your sickness.

If your friend with cancer got worse, it's because of their own negative karma. It's not because of this meditation. Negative karma is the cause of illness. Virtuous motivations are not the cause of illness. It's very important to be clear about that.

Q: Chapter 2, Verse 57 says: "If I stand very attentive even on a smaller cliff, then how much more so on an enduring chasm of a thousand leagues." What does it mean?

VTC: What this means is if you're standing on the edge of a regular cliff, you're going to be very careful, right? You don't want to fall over. If you stand on the edge of the cliff of the lower realms where you could have an unfortunate rebirth, then to not be careful and to disregard the instructions of the Buddha about cause and effect, about karma and its effects – that would be extremely foolish. In other words, Shantideva is saying that we should pay very good attention to the Buddha's teachings on karma and the effects of karma and try and follow them because if we fall over the figurative chasm into the lower realms then that's much worse than actually falling off a regular cliff. That's the meaning of that verse.

Q: When we practice love and compassion, will we eventually become attached to being helpful and good and attached to the feeling of being good and helpful?

VTC: There seems to be a subtle preconception behind this question, which I think is that if we're happy because we do something good and if we feel good about ourselves because we are helpful and kind, then we're really being selfish. Somehow to be compassionate, we have to suffer. I have the feeling that that assumption is lying behind this question. Sometimes we think: "Okay. If I feel pleasure and good, that's BAD. It's only when I suffer and I rip out my heart for sentient beings that then only am I being compassionate.

That's a bunch of hog-wash.

Why shouldn't we feel good when we help other people? Why shouldn't we rejoice at our own virtue? Love and compassion is for all sentient beings. 'All sentient beings' includes ourselves. When we help others, we should feel so happy and so delighted. That doesn't mean we develop an ego identity of "I am such a kind person", "I am such a generous person." I am not talking about developing an ego identity and getting conceited because we helped somebody. I am talking about when we genuinely act out of love and compassion, we should definitely feel happy. We should give ourselves a pat on the back and say: "Ah! This is good! I am transforming my mind. My love and compassion are being more active, not my self-centered thought. Good! I am doing a good job!" Really, we should rejoice and encourage ourselves like this.

Q: What would you say to someone who says "I didn't ask to be born" to their parents?

VTC: Well, I must admit that I used to say that to my parents when I got mad at them. Did some of you also say that to your parents? When your parents don't give you what you want? Or when your parents criticize you, you go: "I didn't ask for you to have me! You decided to have me. Now you take care of me!"

At least that was my mental attitude. I was quite a brag when I was younger, I think. What would I say to somebody who says that to their parents? If you are the parents, if you say to your child: "Don't speak like that to me!" while your child is still mad at you, they probably won't hear you. It's better to have somebody else who they are not mad at to tell them: "You know, that's not the way to speak to your parents. Your parents have been kind to you. They've given you your body. They've taken care of you. Okay, they don't do everything you want but they've still been kind to you. So try and respect them and speak kindly to them."

I think if you are another adult or a friend or whatever, you may be better equipped to intervene in this situation and instruct the child.

Q: Is it realistic to aspire to give everything, that is, is that what Shantideva is really saying? Are we really supposed to take it literally?

VTC: In other words, do I have an out? Can I hang on to something, please? [laughter]

Shantideva is not saying: "Go home and give everything away. Move out of your flat and do everything mentioned here." He's not saying that because clearly, we need certain amount of things to take care of our own life and take care of our family and friends and so on.

What we want to do is to generate the mind that is not attached to the things we have and when the opportunity is there to give, that we feel absolutely no hindrance in giving. It doesn't mean you have to go and give everything away tonight. But it just means it's a way of thinking that loosens our attachment to things, so then when we do have the opportunity to give with wisdom at an appropriate time to an appropriate person with a good motivation, then we go ahead and do that quite easily and naturally.

Remember your homework assignment to be kind to some family member between now and tomorrow. Let's close the evening by sitting quietly for a minute and then we will dedicate.

Dedication of merit

Let's rejoice at our own virtue and the virtue of everybody in this room because we listened to teachings and we thought about something worthwhile and meaningful this evening.

Let's rejoice in all the goodness there is in the world, in all the kindness that sentient beings show towards each other today and in the past, and all the goodness and kindness beings will show towards each other in the future.

Let's rejoice at all the virtuous aspirations and virtuous deeds of all living beings at all times and that includes rejoicing at our own virtue, our own good karma. And then let's imagine it as light in our heart and send it out into the universe. Imagine the light of our own kindness, our own virtue spreading in the universe, touching all the beings and pacifying their minds, freeing them from ignorance, anger and attachment, developing their love, compassion and wisdom.

Let's dedicate that people can be at peace within their own hearts and live peacefully together.

Let's dedicate so that we all learn to listen to each other well, and help each other.

Let's dedicate so that our Dharma teachers have long lives and continually teach and guide us and that all the Buddhas and bodhisattvas continually manifest in our world to teach and guide us.

Let's dedicate so that we can generate the precious bodhicitta mind and act solely for the benefit of all living beings.

Let's dedicate so that we can realize the ultimate nature of reality. And so that we and all living beings can become fully enlightened Buddhas as quickly as possible.

[The End.]