

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

We will start with a little bit of meditation like in all the other sessions. Then I will give the teachings followed by a question-and-answer session.

Did you do your homework? Some of you didn't do it?

Your homework was to be kind to a family member, to go out of your way to try and be kind and talk to them or connect with them. When you make an effort to do that, did you see some response? Was there some change? What happened?

[Comments from audience.]

The other person responded with kindness. Yes. It's very nice to try that instead of always saying: "Oh! The other person should change. They should apologize to me first. They should be nice to me." Instead of all that, we make the effort and extend ourselves. So just keep on doing it and see what happens.

It's funny... I'll tell you one story before we start the meditation.

One time I was giving a similar teaching in the U.S.. One man had said during the teaching that he was having a hard time with one of his colleagues; he didn't get along well with this colleague at all. So I gave the whole group this homework assignment: to try to be nice to someone and especially to try and point out their good qualities to them instead of criticizing them. We met once a week for the course, so everybody had this homework assignment to do everyday for a week, which is to say something nice about somebody to them.

The following week as we were coming in for the class, I met the man who mentioned previously about having a hard time with his colleague. I asked him: "Well how did it go with the colleague that you don't get along with? Did you do your homework assignment?"

And he said, "Well, on the first day, I tried to find something good about him and it was really hard! So I made something up and said it to him. And then the next day, I also said something nice to him but I really meant it that time." And what happened over the rest of the week was that every time he said something nice to this colleague, his colleague of course changed his attitude too and started being nice to him. So by the end of the week, he said it was very easy to say something nice about his colleague to him.

This shows that if we exert some effort, a whole relationship can turn around. If you forgot to do your homework last night then do it tonight. If you did it last night, do it again tonight and see what happens.

Cultivating a positive motivation for listening to teachings

Let's generate our motivation. Let's rejoice at our precious human life. Rejoice that we have the opportunity to listen to the Buddha's teachings and to put them into practice to transform our heart and mind. Let's get a feel of our human potential, that we have the

possibility of developing impartial love and compassion for all beings, that we have the capacity to realize the nature of reality and thus eliminate all the ignorance, craving and animosity that keeps us bound in cyclic existence and in constantly recurring problems. Rejoicing at our opportunity, let's make a strong determination to use it wisely, and in particular to listen attentively and take the teachings to heart so that we can put them into practice in our daily life, and to do this with the long term motivation of attaining full enlightenment for the benefit of all living beings. Generate that motivation.

Slowly open your eyes and come out of your meditation.

The faults of self-centredness and the benefits of cherishing others

Yesterday, I spoke a little about the defects of being self-centered. If you can contemplate this and remember it, it will come in very helpful in your daily life.

One example is sometimes other people for whatever reason, don't treat us so well. They may lie to us. They may betray our trust. We are in cyclic existence so these kinds of things happen. When these things happen it is very tempting for us to get upset and blame the other person: "I trusted this person so much but they betrayed me; they lied to me; they cheated me. They are such an awful person!" And you go on and on about this person. When we do that, we're stuck in our self-centeredness and we make ourselves more and more miserable as we contemplate the other person's faults and blame them more and more.

Why do we get miserable? We feel miserable because we can't change their faults, can we? The more we focus on what we consider to be somebody else's faults, the more we feel like a powerless victim since we can't change their faults. That feeling of helplessness creates a victim mentality in us and makes us quite upset. It doesn't do us or others much good.

There is another way of viewing this situation that could transform our whole emotional reaction to it. Instead of seeing this situation as somebody else's fault, we say: "Okay. The other person did these unkind things. But why did they do them to me? The principal cause was my own negative karma that I created in a previous life." The other person did a mistaken action; we're not saying that their bad behavior is good but we are recognizing that we experienced the result of their bad behavior, that we were the object of their bad behavior because of our own bad behavior in previous times.

So we have to say: "Okay! Somebody's lying to me. Why do people lie to me? Well, it's because I have lied to other people." And initially our ego says: "No! I didn't lie to anybody!" And then we sit with it a little bit longer and we go: "Well..hmm.. Maybe little lies." And then we looked a little bit more and we realized that we've actually told some pretty big lies in our life. And we usually did them for self-centered reasons, didn't we? Like I was saying yesterday, we don't say: "I'm going to lie to benefit everybody in the universe." We're always lying to protect ourselves or to get something for ourselves. The result of lying is that people lie to us.

Another result of lying is that even when we tell the truth people don't believe us. When we encounter unpleasant incidents of people not believing us or people lying to us, instead of blaming the other person, we look and say: "This is the result of my own self-centered thought. There is no sense blaming the other person; I have to blame my own self-centered thought." When we do that we come to see that our own self-centered thought is our biggest enemy. It also deceives us the most because our selfish mind puts on this big show

of being our friend and looking out for our welfare when in actual fact every single unethical action that we've ever done has been motivated by our self-centered mind.

Has anybody here not stolen something, even as a kid? We've all done things like that. Why? We're looking for our own selfish benefit. Why do we lie to people? For the same reason. Why do we talk bad behind their back? Or shout at them to their face? Why do we spend hours gossiping? It all boils down to the self-centered thought. When we see that the unhappy results we experience are due to our own actions, our own karma, when we see that all our negative karma is the result of actions motivated by the self-centered thought, then we can trace our own suffering back to this self-centered thought and point the finger at it.

This method of thinking is very helpful when we encounter different problems because it prevents us from getting angry with other people. When we get angry with other people, we only create more negative karma, don't we?

We might be right but when we are angry we still create negative karma. The anger is fed by the self-centered thought. So in this way, when we check, we can see the disadvantages of having the self-centered thought in our own life. Whenever we experience something unpleasant, remember to trace it back to our own negative karma which we did due to the self-centered thought.

This doesn't mean we start hating ourselves. It doesn't mean we blame ourselves in the same way we used to blame somebody else for our problems. What it does mean is that we take responsibility for the events that happen in our life and the circumstances that we face. Instead of blaming others we realize it comes from our own self-centeredness. We understand that if we want to be happy then we have to be very attentive, so that when the self-centered mind arises, we kick it out and do not follow it.

When the self-centered mind arises, we usually follow its instructions. The self-centered mind says to scream at somebody and we scream. Self-centered mind says to slam the door and walk out, and we slam the door and walk out. We usually follow the self-centered mind but that just leads us to so many problems in our life. If we recognize this then we don't follow it.

The self-centered attitude is like a big thief

In the Buddhist scriptures, it is said that the self-centered attitude is like a big thief. If a thief comes into your house, do you say: "Do sit down and have a cup of tea. Would you like some biscuits?" Will you be nice to a thief that comes into your house and ask him to hang around, stay a little bit longer? "Oh! You took my television set but you forgot to take the computer. Here! Take my computer too! Here is my bank book and here is a blank check." Do you do this when a thief comes into your house? I hope not!

But when the self-centered thought comes into our mind, we just let it come in and do whatever it wants and run the show. It's just like welcoming a thief into our house because the self-centered mind steals away all our virtue. It destroys our good karma. It creates so many problems for us and other people. Actually it makes more problems than a thief because a thief only harms us this life but our self-centered thought makes us create negative karma that will harm us in future lives.

When we see this clearly, then when the thought comes up to look out only for ourselves we immediately cut it off in our mind and we replace it with the thought that wishes to cherish others.

To replace it with the wish to cherish others, we have to first see the advantages of cherishing others. Now, we all want others to cherish us, don't we? Wouldn't it be nice if everybody cherished us? We want others to cherish us because we see that we would be happy. By the same token, if we cherish others, it creates happiness in their lives.

Cherishing others is the best way to be happy

Then we consider that there is only one of me but there is an infinite number, countless number of other living beings. If we want to create happiness in the world, then we cherish others because there are so many of them. His Holiness the Dalai Lama always counsels that if we want to be happy, the best way is to cherish others.

Why is that? Because when we cherish others, they are happy and we live in a world with happy people. If we only cherish ourselves, we will do many things that make other people unhappy and then we have to live with unhappy people.

Do you want to live with unhappy people? It's not much fun, is it? In the family, if we're very mean to a family member and that family member is unhappy, we have to live with that unhappy family member.

In society, if we look down on other groups in the society, whether it's other religious groups, ethnic groups, racial groups or socio-economic groups, if we cut off some groups from the opportunity to have a good livelihood and to have happiness in society then those people are going to be unhappy. We will then have to live in a society with unhappy people. What happens when people in the society are unhappy? There're demonstrations, protests, riots. There're all sorts of social unease.

When everybody in the society takes care of one another and creates a more equal society where there are jobs, health care, etc for everybody, then people in the society will be happy so everybody lives peacefully. We can see very clearly here the benefit of cherishing others. The benefit comes back to us because we live in a happy society.

In the U.S., people don't understand this very well. For example, in many towns when there is a plan to increase taxes in order to build more schools or to enhance the education programs, many tax payers don't want to vote for tax increases because they say: "Why should I pay for somebody else's children to go to school? They can pay for their own children to go to school! I shouldn't have to pay taxes for their children to go to school."

Well, what happens is when children don't get a good education and don't have good extra-curricular activities after school they get into a lot of trouble, don't they? They break into houses, they paint graffiti all over the town, they get involved in drinking, drugging and all sorts of unhappy things.

When these same children – because they didn't get a good education and they didn't have good extra-curricular activities – got into drugs and alcohol, then of course when they become adults they do bigger crimes and they wind up in prison. And the tax payers are very happy to spend money to build more prisons.

In the U.S., prison management is a huge industry now. Seriously!! The government is not the only one running prisons; they started letting private companies run prisons. So some prisons are run for profit. They have to show earnings to their shareholders. It's horrible! It's really dreadful. The tax payers are very happy to build more prisons but they are not

happy to prevent citizens from becoming criminals by giving them a good education when they are young.

Do you see how people aren't thinking very clearly? I can say this about my own country. Very often people don't think clearly. They're just looking in the short term for what's beneficial, but in the long term, there is more unhappiness for themselves and others. That's because they were thinking and acting out of the self-centered thought.

When we see this in our personal life and in the society then we see why it is so important to not be self-centered. Because the result comes back to us right away in this life. It also comes back to us in future lives and it also inhibits us from attaining liberation and enlightenment.

Cherishing other sentient beings brings about the exact opposite result. When we cherish others and are kind towards them, they are happy and we have happiness in our family, happiness amongst various groups in society, more equality among nations in the world, and therefore we have more peace and less war.

There are so many benefits that come from cherishing others. Also when we cherish others, we create so much good karma and we become the ones who experience the result of that good karma. Every time we have happiness in our lives, it is because we created some good karma in the past. Our good karma is mostly created because we thought of benefiting others.

When there is a chance to cheat somebody in business, we think of the faults of self-centeredness and the benefits of cherishing others and then we don't cheat. We do honest business. When we do our business in an honest way then our clients and customers will trust us and they are going to come back.

When we do business in a dishonest way and bribery or other negative acts are committed, you don't sleep well at night because you know you have done something dishonest that you could get arrested and be imprisoned for it. If you think it's not going to happen to you, just ask some of the American CEOs who are in prison right now.

The whole point is that having a kind heart towards others creates happiness now and in the future. It's quite a wonderful practice.

Like I've said before, having a kind heart towards others, being loving and compassionate and acting for their welfare doesn't mean that you always do what they want you to do. Sometimes people are confused about what's going to bring them happiness. They want things that are actually counter-productive. So caring about other people sometimes means that you have to risk their being unhappy with you.

Parents know this. When you are a parent, you can't be in a popularity contest to win your child's friendship. It's not the job of a parent to win a popularity contest with their kids. Your job is to help your kids be good citizens and help them to be happy people. In doing so, you have to teach them how to deal with the frustration of not always getting what they want. To do that, you have to sometimes say "No" to them, when they want something unreasonable or something damaging. When that happens your kid will not like you and they may yell and scream and call you names! But you know that you are acting for their benefit in the long run.

This applies to many areas in our life too. If you are at work and there's a colleague who isn't doing their job properly, you need to go to them and tell them what the expectations are. But you also need to help them get the skills to be able to do the job properly. To help somebody, we may sometimes have to say things that they initially don't like to hear. But if we have the courage to say those things and help the people solve their difficulties then very often they will come back later and thank us, even though they might not be very happy with us initially. So there're lots of benefit from cherishing others.

Let's continue with the text now.

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.

Even if we can't do these now, it is very good to just imagine and try to train our mind to think in this way. That will help us eventually to be able to act like this.

We will be talking more about the act of giving away our body in the later verses. In actual fact, in the bodhisattva practice, you're not allowed to give up your body unless you've reached a certain level of spiritual attainment where you can control your rebirth and come back in another rebirth in which you're able to practice the Dharma. Before you get to that particular state, you're not allowed to give away your life voluntarily. So don't worry, you don't have to do it tonight. [laughter]

But as a warm-up procedure, we imagine giving our body away even though we may not have the courage to do it or we may not have the spiritual attainments to do it. We think, for example if somebody has kidney failure, we give them our kidneys. We think about giving away our lungs or our heart. We start out with thinking of giving away body parts. Or we think of situations where sacrificing our life would rescue somebody in danger and being willing to do that.

Even though we are not actually at the level that we can do it now, it is good to cultivate the thought of being able to give our body. Some of you may have heard the story of the Buddha in a previous life when he was a Prince in a place in Nepal called Namo Buddha. The prince was walking in the forest one day and he saw a mother tiger that had just given birth to a few tiger cubs. The mother tiger was starving and she couldn't nurse her cubs. The cubs were going to die if they didn't have food. The prince who was a bodhisattva, had great compassion for the mother tiger and the baby tigers. He gave his body to the mother tiger. By eating the prince, the mother tiger would regain her strength and could produce milk to feed her cubs so that they would all live. The bodhisattva made the great sacrifice of giving anyway his own body so as to keep some other sentient beings alive.

Although we may not be able to do it, it's good to think: "Some day may I have the courage to do that. May I have so little attachment to my body that I can do that." In the mean time, what we can do is to imagine giving away our body in the sense of imagining our body manifesting in many different forms according to what sentient beings need. Imagine that we are able to become a doctor for people who need a doctor. Or become medicine for people who need medicine. And become a nurse for people who need a nurse. This is the verse we've covered before. Imagine that we are able to multiply and emanate many different kinds of bodies according to what sentient beings need. Even meditating in this way on the level of imagination can plant seeds in our own mindstream so that one day when we actually become bodhisattvas and have the skill to emanate many bodies, we are able to do so.

It's the same when we talk about giving away our enjoyments or our wealth. It doesn't mean you have to empty out your bank account tonight. You could become a little bit more generous – that never hurt anybody – but you don't have to give everything away. But in our meditation we imagine giving everything away.

We may not be able to do it in real life, but in our meditation, in order to create the mind that takes delight in giving, we can imagine giving away our flat, our food, our car, our computer or other things we have and imagine other people experiencing delight and happiness when we do that.

We give away our virtue in the same way. I was telling you last night about the man who was afraid to give away his virtue because he thought he didn't have very much and didn't want to lose it. Instead of thinking that way we practice giving away our virtue by imagining that it becomes the realizations on the path to enlightenment and we send them out to all the different beings.

Or imagining that our virtue becomes all the conducive circumstances for others to practice the Dharma and we send them out. When we do that we think of how happy other beings are going to be when they receive our generosity. Instead of feeling: "Oh if I give it, I won't have it", we feel: "If I give, others will have it and they'll be happy." It brings such happiness to our own heart to think of other beings being happy as a result of our generosity that then we want to give. By giving they feel happy and we feel happy.

A Story of my miserliness

Whereas when we are miserly, our own heart is very tight and not so happy at all. How many of you have heard my Kashmir sweater story about my own miserliness? A few people have. Well, I am going to tell it again, so you have to listen to it again.

This is a situation from my own life which very clearly demonstrates the disadvantages of self-centeredness and miserliness and the advantages of generosity and cherishing others.

A number of years ago, I was invited to teach in the former Soviet countries. I was traveling to several of the countries in the ex-Soviet bloc. At one point I was in Ukraine. I was traveling with somebody who was my translator and we were taking trains and we had a layover in Kiev. The translator had a friend Sarsha in Kiev so we went to spend the day with Sarsha.

Sarsha was young, in her early 20's. She didn't have very much. We just popped in out of nowhere; she didn't know that we were coming. But she fed us the whole day. She didn't have very much so we ate different kinds of potatoes and a little bit of cabbage. She had some chocolate that she had stashed away for a special occasion. She brought out this chocolate to give to us because we were her guests.

That evening Sarsha accompanied us to the train station. As I said Sarsha had very little. She and I were about the same size and I had in my suitcase a maroon Kashmir sweater. Now, when you are a nun and you can only wear maroon, and it's not easy to find a maroon sweater in the stores – when you find a maroon sweater, you treasure it. And a Kashmir sweater at that – you know how soft and nice a Kashmir sweater is! When I was in Japan one time somebody had given me this maroon Kashmir sweater which I loved.

So we were on the subway going to the train station. I got the idea that I should give Sarsha my maroon Kashmir sweater. As soon as I had that thought another part of my mind said: "No way!"

And thus began an internal civil war.

My friend and Sarsha were chatting happily on the subway and I was in civil war. One part of my mind was saying: "Sarsha has nothing. Give her your sweater!"

The other part of my mind was saying: "But if I gave her my sweater, I won't have it!"

Then the other part said: "But, look, you are practicing the bodhisattva deeds! What's this about clinging on to your own possessions?! She needs the sweater more!"

"NO! I'm not giving it."

So the mind was going back and forth like this. I was completely miserable. Then we got to the train station. Sarsha went away and came back with some sweet rolls for us that she had bought at the train station. She had very little money but she spent it on some sweet rolls for us. I was sitting there going: "Chodron, what's wrong with you? You can get another sweater. It's no problem! Look at how generous she is even though she doesn't have much. You have so much yet you can't even give her your sweater!"

And then my mind was going: "No, way, I am not giving her that sweater! I like it too much, I'll never find another one like this."

Then we got on the train. It was a few minutes before the train left and Sarsha got on the train to chat with us before it left. My sweater was in my suitcase which was under the bed and so I said: "Oh well, I can't give her the sweater now, it's in the suitcase under the bed. If I pull the suitcase out, the train will start going and then Sarsha will have to jump off. So I can't take the sweater out now. Just forget it!"

And then the other part of my mind said: "Come on! Give her your sweater!"

So finally, I just got so fed up with my own internal civil war, I pulled out the suitcase, took out the sweater and handed it to Sarsha.

Her face lit up. It was incredible! She was so happy and when I saw how happy she was, I said to myself: "What was wrong with me? I held on to something when it was so easy to make somebody else so happy."

This incident really stuck in my mind. Sarsha loved the sweater because the next week on our way back, I stopped in Kiev again for the day. She met me at the train station. It was really hot outside but she was wearing the sweater anyway.

This was an experience from my own life about how being miserly and self-centered make ourselves miserable and cause us to miss opportunities to make other people happy. Sometimes when we just extend ourselves a little bit we can give so much happiness to others.

Verse 11: Surrendering everything is Nirvana and my mind seeks Nirvana. If I must surrender everything, it is better that I give it to sentient beings.

Surrendering everything is Nirvana. Nirvana is the state of liberation from cyclic existence. It's the cessation of all our suffering and all the mental afflictions that cause our suffering. 'Surrendering everything' refers not just to physical things. It also means surrendering our ignorance, our clinging attachment, our resentment, our jealousy. Our mind is seeking liberation. If we really want liberation, we have to give up our attachment to worldly things because that attachment prevents us from attaining the higher happiness of liberation.

'If I must surrender everything, it is better that I gave it to sentient beings.'

At the time that we die, we surrender our body, our possessions, our friends and relatives. We don't necessarily surrender our ignorance, anger and attachment when we die. But we are separated from all of our objects of attachment at the time of death. We don't take our body with us. We don't take our money and possessions with us. We don't take our friends and relatives with us.

Maybe I should say even when you burn all the bank notes from the Bank of Hell, all the paper houses, paper computers, paper refrigerators, they don't reach your friends and relatives who have died. When we die, everything stays here. It doesn't matter how much stuff people burn for us; we don't get it.

At the time of death we have to separate from all these things. Considering that we're going to have to separate from these things anyway, wouldn't it be better to give them away with a spirit of generosity and to create merit? When we die our wealth doesn't come with us but our good karma from being generous does come with us.

Why are you born in a wealthy, prosperous country like Singapore? Did you ever wonder that? Why weren't you born in Darfur? You have such prosperity here in Singapore. Why? It's because of being generous in a previous life. Seeing that, you see: "Oh generosity creates wealth" then we want to be generous, not just so that we will have a good rebirth but also because it directly benefits others and also because we want to nourish our own mind with the good karma of generosity because that will help us to attain liberation and enlightenment.

Seeing that we're going to have to separate from things anyway and seeing that generosity creates so much merit, then doesn't it make sense to be generous with the things that we're going to have to separate from anyway? Use the things that we have to our advantage to create merit because that merit will come with us to the next life.

Twenty years ago when I was living here in Singapore, there was one young man in his early thirties who was dying of cancer. He asked me to counsel him, and we spent a lot of time together. He had a very generous heart. It was quite amazing. He knew he was dying of cancer. He was only 31 or 32 but he gave everything away. His most prized possessions were his books but he also gave them away. They were the last thing that he gave away. It was very beautiful to see him being so generous before he died. I was actually there at the time he died. The last thing he said was to his sister and he said: "Remember to make offerings to the temple after I die. Remember to give away anything left over that I might have to other people." I thought that he was so wise in how he practiced. He realized that at the time of death, he couldn't take anything with him and that whole time as he was dying he created so much good karma by being generous.

I'll explain the next two verses together.

Verse 12: For the sake of all beings I have made this body pleasureless. Let them continually beat it, revile it, and cover it with filth.

Verse 13: Let them play with my body. Let them laugh at it and ridicule it. What does it matter to me? I have given my body to them.

These two verses sound a little bit strange. Why should we give our body to beings who are going to revile it, kick it and cover it with filth and stuff like that? What're these verses talking about?

Actually what these two verses are trying to get us to do is to develop a state of mind in which we are not attached to our body. Why? If our mind is attached to our body, it becomes very difficult to die peacefully because there is a lot of craving for our body. If we imagine in our meditation giving away our body and we give up our attachment to our body, then when the time of death comes we will not be clinging and craving for our body. The mind can then separate from the body very peacefully without clinging or craving.

These two verses are designed to get us thinking about giving away our body without being attached to it.

Verse 14: Let them have me perform deeds that are conducive to their happiness. Whoever resorts to me, may it never be in vain.

When it says "Let them have me perform deeds that are conducive to their happiness", what we are saying to ourselves is "I am going to dedicate my body and life to being of service to other sentient beings. Let other sentient beings use my body and life in whatever way will bring them the utmost happiness. That's what that verse is saying. In our own heart, we are dedicating our body, our life, our energy, our time and our service so that everything we do can be of benefit to all sentient beings, so that whenever any sentient being comes to us and asks for help, we can always respond; may they never ask for help in vain. In other words, may we never out of our own selfishness turn them away.

Of course if people are asking for something that we don't have, we have to say: "I'm sorry, I don't have it." Or if people are asking us to do something that we don't have the skills to do or the time to do, we have to say: "I'm very sorry, I can't do that." But what these verses are getting us to think about is if we have the time and the skill or the material things and somebody asks for help, then let us help according to our ability. It is again helping us to loosen the shackles of our own stinginess and our own self-centeredness, to broaden our mind and think of the benefit of others and the good that we can do for them.

Verse 15: For those who have resorted to me and have an angry or unkind thought, may even that always become the cause for their accomplishing every goal.

What this verse is saying is, even if people who have come to us and ask for help have an angry or an unkind thought towards us, may that still be the cause for their accomplishing every goal.

What bodhisattvas do is they pray that every interaction they have with any sentient being be something that benefits that sentient being in the long term. Even if somebody is angry with them or criticizes them or is rude to them, the bodhisattva will respond by making prayers for that person by saying: "In the future when I meet that person in this life or in future lives, may I be able to teach them the Dharma. Even though they were mean to me when they met me – they stole my stuff, cheated me, trashed my reputation behind my

back or were angry at me – we made some karmic connection, and by the power of that connection, when I meet them in the future, may we have a good relationship that's based on the Dharma and may I be able to benefit them in the Dharma.

Isn't that an incredible way to respond when other people harm us? Do you ever respond like that when other people are mad at you? We usually respond with: "Go to Hell!" But a bodhisattva will say: "May I meet you in the future and lead you to perfect enlightenment." "Even if you don't like me, even if you are angry with me, may our having met benefit you in the long term because we have this karmic connection and I am going to work for your benefit in the future."

Isn't that a beautiful way to react? This is a way of reacting that we should practice. Instead of getting so angry when people do things we don't like, we should react with a kind prayer that says: "Ok, may I turn this karmic connection into something beneficial in a future life and lead that being on the path to enlightenment."

Many years ago, one of my teachers came to Los Angeles where I happened to be at that time. I had the great privilege of cooking for him. He had to endure my terrible cooking. One day some of the disciples invited us to go to the beach. My teacher was quite elderly at that time and we were walking along the beach in Santa Monica. There were all kinds of sea anemones on the beach. Sea anemones don't move around much. When you stick something in their mouth, it kind of closes over it. That's how they eat. If some little fish or insect comes to their mouth, they close around it and digest it.

My teacher was going to the sea anemones and he would put his prayer beads in the sea anemones' mouth. The sea anemones would start to close their mouth over the prayer beads but he would of course pull it out before they completely shut their mouth over it.

I was wondering at first: "Why is he doing this?" Then I realized he is making a karmic connection with these sentient beings. There were these very ignorant sentient beings, these sea anemones, and that was the only way he could make some karmic connection with them – by making them touch his prayer beads that he had used to count so many mantra and making a prayer for them whenever they touched it.

It made me think that whenever you see different sentient beings, even if it is spiders or cockroaches or whatever insects, you could make a prayer: "Just by us having this karmic connection may I be able to benefit you in a future life."

It's a beautiful way to react, isn't it? It is something that's very nice to train our mind in.

Verse 16: May those who falsely accuse me, who harm me, and who ridicule me all partake of Awakening.

Instead of wishing harm to people who falsely accuse me of doing things that I didn't do, who interfere with my happiness and harm me physically or verbally, who ruin my reputation, who treat me unfairly, who ridicule me and make fun of me and tease me about things I'm sensitive to, I wish that all these beings may become fully enlightened Buddhas. Isn't that beautiful!? Don't you think so?

It's so different from our ordinary way of thinking, isn't it? Somebody makes fun of us and we think: "I'm going to make fun of you back!" Somebody ruins our reputation and we go: "I'm going to ruin your reputation even more!" We are so full of vengefulness. When we act out of vengefulness and a self-centered mind, we're only creating the karma for ourselves

to be born in the hell realm. There's absolutely no benefit to being vengeful and harming somebody who harmed us. No benefit at all! It only harms us as well as them. Here in this verse is a beautiful way to deal with such situations, which is to wish that person well. Even though they harm us, even though they do things we don't like, we wish them well.

Verse 17: May I be a protector for those who are without protectors, a guide for travelers, and a boat, a bridge, and a ship for those who wish to cross over.

Verse 18: May I be a lamp for those who seek light, a bed for those who seek rest, and may I be a servant for all beings who desire a servant.

This is the same kind of thought: "May I become whatever sentient beings need." We may not have that ability now but after we become arya bodhisattvas, in other words bodhisattvas who have realized the nature of reality directly, we will have the ability to emanate many different kinds of forms and we can actually become these kinds of things for the sentient beings who have the karma to receive them. If sentient beings don't have the karma to receive these things then bodhisattvas and Buddhas can't manifest as them. But for the sentient beings who have the karma to receive the aid they need, then very often bodhisattvas can emanate different bodies as either people or even as inanimate objects for the benefit of those sentient beings.

"May I be a protector for those who are without protectors." Animals who need protection from human exploitation, human beings who are being oppressed – may we become their protectors.

May we become a guide for travelers or travelers who are lost, who are fearful in a strange place – may we show them the way.

May we become a boat, a bridge and a ship for those who wish to cross over. May we not only help them cross over a body of water but may we also become a guide on the path to enlightenment and help sentient beings cross the ocean of cyclic existence.

"May I be a lamp for those who seek light, a bed for those who seek rest, and may I be a servant for all beings who desire a servant."

Regardless of how sentient beings treat me, if they lay on me because I'm a bed, if they boss me around because I am a servant, I'm willing to be that because it is something that is of benefit to them.

Reading this kind of verses and thinking in this way helps us to reduce our ego. Our ego is always saying: "I want servants. Other beings should help me and I should be the object of other beings' generosity." But here we are training our mind to see it in the exact opposite way. It is a way of training our mind in virtue and creating that habitual mental attitude to look out for the welfare of all beings. By creating that mental attitude, it becomes easier and easier to give to others.

Verse 19: To all sentient beings may I be a wish-fulfilling gem, a vase of good fortune, an efficacious mantra, a great medication, a wish-fulfilling tree, and a wish-granting cow.

Some of these are ancient Indian symbols.

In ancient Indian culture, a wish-fulfilling gem is a gem that was said to be somewhere in the bottom of the sea. If you found it you could wish for any material object and you could get it.

A vase of good fortune – that's the same idea as a wish-fulfilling gem.

A mantra that could cure illness.

A great medication that could remedy sentient beings' physical suffering.

A wish-fulfilling tree – that proverbial tree that grows money. "May I become a tree that grows money for all those who need money."

A wish-granting cow – that's also another ancient Indian symbol. A cow that can grant all wishes.

Here we're saying: "May I be able to provide what sentient beings need."

Verse 20: Just as earth and other elements are useful in various ways to innumerable sentient beings dwelling throughout infinite space,

Verse 21: So may I be in various ways a source of life for the sentient beings present throughout space until they are all liberated.

Just as earth, water, fire and air are useful to all sentient beings, just as they are the bases of all life on our planet, just as they are useful to sentient beings throughout infinite space, in the same way, may I be a source of life for sentient beings. May I be the basis of their happiness. May I be the support that they can depend upon whenever they need anything. Whether they need friendship, whether they need a torch, whatever they need, may I become that. May I do that until they are all liberated.

For beings who need friends, may I be the friend. For those who need a happy co-worker, may I be the happy co-worker. For those who need a son or daughter, may I be a cooperative son or daughter. For those who need a mediator to try and heal a relationship, may I be the mediator. May I be whatever person that others need.

May I become the material objects that they need. May I even become earth, water, fire and air – the basic elements that form what other sentient beings need. May I do this for all sentient beings throughout infinite space until they attain liberation.

We're making this wish not just for our friends and the people we like, but also for enemies, strangers and people who disapprove of or dislike us. May we become what they need and ease their suffering. May we lead them on the path to liberation and full awakening.

These kinds of verses are so expansive. They are so expansive that sometimes when we read them, we think they sound crazy. But if we train our mind in them, our own heart opens and becomes so big. We realize an incredible source of joy and happiness within ourselves because we develop this amazing love and compassion that's impartial towards all sentient beings and we eliminate our own attachment and miserliness that make us so miserable.

We will pause here at verse 21. We'll do the rest of the chapter tomorrow. Please read the rest of the chapter. It's the actual process of taking the bodhisattva vows and generating the bodhicitta, so it's good if you read them.

Questions and Answers

Q: Please tell us more about the situation of Western monastics in the United States. I was told that some monks and nuns need to put on lay clothes to work in the day at regular jobs outside and then put on their monastic robes at night after work. Does the Abbey provide monastic training and shelter to its monastics in order to improve the Western monastic order?

VTC: Unfortunately, the situation of Western Buddhist monastics in the West is a difficult situation, at least for those of us who are in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. The Tibetans themselves are a refugee community so they can only take care of their own Tibetan monks and nuns who are living as refugees in India and the native ones who're still in Tibet. The Western Sangha are not provided for. Somehow there is the assumption that if we are Western we must have money.

This however is not always the case. Some Western monastics don't have a monastery or a temple or a Dharma centre to live in, so they are forced to go to work to earn money. They have to put on lay clothes to do that and then in the evening put on their robes. I make a very strong determination when I ordained 31 years ago that I was never going to do that and so I've never had to. I had been in situations where I was extremely poor but I never went to work. But I do know other people who are doing or have done that. So it is a difficult situation.

One of the reasons I am creating Sravasti Abbey, is so that people who have the monastic inclination will have a place to live and have room and board. We don't charge the monastics and even the lay people who come to stay at the Abbey. We operate purely on donations.

When I started the Abbey, people told me I was completely "nuts" to do this. But we've managed so far. We depend completely on donations from people. By the way when I say "Western" I don't necessarily mean people with white skin. I mean people who are non-Tibetans. So actually, 'Western' isn't the right word to use. I should say 'non-Tibetan monastics'. The Abbey provides an opportunity for monastics to come and train where they don't have to worry about room and board.

So this was one of my ideas in starting the Abbey. And also to provide a place where people can have monastic training because clearly if somebody has to go out and work at a job, they will not get the monastic training that they need and therefore, it'll be hard for them to remain as a monastic. Even if they do, it's hard for them to teach others because they haven't had the proper conditions to study and practice themselves.

We're at the beginning stage now, but the Abbey is a place where we can practice and learn the monastic discipline so that we can have more teachers that can be sent out to teach; where lay people can come and live with the monastic community and practice together with us and come on retreats; where people who are thinking of ordaining can come and live with the monastics to see if it's a way that they enjoy and if they want to continue doing that.

We are one of the first places in the U.S. that does this. You are all welcome to come.

I should tell you that at the Abbey we are going to study the Dharma primarily according to the Tibetan Buddhist tradition but in our monastic training we're going to take the Chinese lineage. For example my full ordination was in Taiwan, so I have the Chinese lineage even though I wear the Tibetan robes. The whole Abbey – Sravasti Abbey – will be like this.

Q: Because of their noble intentions, Buddhists generally become more docile and people of other religions become more successful in life. If I become more successful, I will have more power, money, etc to benefit more people. What's your opinion?

VTC: First of all, I don't think that becoming a Buddhist necessarily makes you more docile. It makes you more patient. If you really understand the bodhisattva intention correctly, it doesn't make you docile. Compassion doesn't mean that you let other people walk all over you. It doesn't mean you become a door-mat. That's not compassion; that's stupidity. There's a big difference between compassion and stupidity. It doesn't mean that you have to be docile: whatever somebody wants, fine, you will do it. No! You can be very assertive and you can be straight-forward but you are also honest and truthful and looking out for the welfare of everybody in the situation.

It may seem that people of other religions are more aggressive and so they're going to get the promotion and so on. But like I said and I have been saying the last few nights I don't necessarily see that as the measure of success in life. Having a higher status job or having lots of money is considered as a success by societal standard but by my standard it doesn't necessarily mean you are more successful.

To me people who are successful are those who are happy and those who are creating virtue so that when they die they can die peacefully. I define success as people who are creating the causes for liberation and enlightenment.

So there are different definitions of success and you have to see who is more successful in which area. Some people can be successful in both areas. They can have a high status in society. They can have a lot of money and they can also be quite generous and create a lot of virtue. There are some people who are deemed successful by society but they are not successful in their life. They have a ton of money and they are wealthy but they're also miserable. Then there are other people who are very successful in their private life. They are very happy. They have virtuous intentions. When they die their death is very smooth. They're on their way to enlightenment although they don't have a lot of money. And then there are some people who are not successful in both areas. So we have to really think about what success is.

Q: How can we help those victims in the recent Tibet crisis? Can we chant for them?

VTC: I think whenever we see social unrest, it's very good to send compassion to those areas and to have compassion for everybody in the whole situation.

There is unrest in many parts of the world. In Iraq also. Something happened in Kenya a few weeks ago. Wherever we see unrests and people who are unhappy, generate compassion and send them compassion and wishes so that these conflicts can be resolved in a way that brings happiness to everybody who is involved in them, and so that the conflicts can be resolved without anybody getting hurt or injured.

Q: What does it mean when we say that karma is ripening?

VTC: Karma refers to our actions; actions we've done in the past. The ripening of karma means that these actions bear their results. Like I was saying before, generosity is the cause of wealth. Lying to others is the cause of being lied to. You have this relationship between the actions such as generosity and lying, and their results such as being wealthy and being lied to.

So karma ripening means that when the actions were done, a seed was planted in the mindstream and now that seed is ripening and bringing the result. So that's what karma ripening means.

This person also said that they heard that sometimes when you are a novice monk or nun, some of your karma will ripen faster. If this is so, why?

It depends. Karma doesn't necessarily ripen faster. Remember that karma means both good karma and bad karma. In some situations because a person may be practicing purification some of their bad karma may ripen more quickly. We always say that's very good because that karma ripens in a small illness or something going wrong this lifetime. Whereas it could have ripened in a huge amount of suffering in future rebirths.

So if any monastic or anybody is doing purification practice, sometimes that negative karma may ripen and they may fall ill. But when they do, they should say, "Fantastic!" Because that was the karma that could have ripened in them being born in the hell realm for an eon. Compared to being born in the hell realm for an eon, being sick for a few days is okay.

Similarly, it could sometimes be that when we are ordained and engaging in a practice of virtue, our good karma ripens more quickly. Because when we abstain from harmful actions then we create situations in which our good karma can ripen more easily. When we do negative actions, not only do our negative actions create the negative karma which will ripen in the future but just the circumstances of the negative actions very often create the possibility for our previously created negative karma to ripen very quickly.

For example, I was telling you that I do social outreach with inmates, with prisoners. Some of them committed a crime, so they created a negative karma that will ripen maybe in their future life, but by creating the crime they also wound up in prison this life. Or they also wound up having somebody else shoot them or stab them or whatever. So often when we're in situations where we do negative actions, it makes it easier for other people to harm us. In other words, it makes it easier for our own negative karma to ripen.

It is similar with people who are drinking and drugging. When you are drunk or intoxicated, it is very easy for your negative karma to ripen because you don't have much control over your mind.

Q: If I plan to join retreats or become a nun in the long term, how should I prepare myself?

VTC: Joining retreats and becoming a monk or a nun are two different situations, so I'll talk about them separately.

If you want to join a retreat, you can prepare yourself by doing some reading on the topic of the retreat before you go to it. That is very good. You can also prepare yourself by starting to have a daily meditation practice. When you start going to retreats, it's good to

start with short retreats. Like the two-day retreat this weekend. It's a good one to start with; it's only two days. And it's also not a live-in retreat so you don't have to wake up so early in the morning to meditate. You got it easy!

So you can begin by going to shorter retreats and then as you get familiar with the process of doing more meditation and more retreats then start attending longer retreats. It's very nice to do group retreats because the group energy and group discipline makes it very easy for us to practice ourselves.

We find this very much at the Abbey. People who live at the Abbey and the people who visit us say that it is so much easier for them to do their meditation practice at the Abbey because everybody is doing it. We have two meditation periods a day – in the morning and in the evening. Everybody is getting up early. Everybody is going to meditate, so it becomes very easy to do it.

We have a study period. We have a teaching period. It becomes very easy to go to teachings. It becomes very easy to study because everybody is doing it. When you live in a community like that, the support of everybody else strengthens your own practice. So if you visit a community, that can strengthen your own practice in the short term. If you live in a monastic community then of course you get the long term benefits of that.

If you are thinking of ordaining, there is a number of things you can do to prepare. On my website www.ThubtenChodron.org, there is a whole section about monastic life and a lot of different things. You can read the articles; there's a reading list. If you are thinking about ordaining, it's good to go and spend some time in a monastery and see how you like it.

At the Abbey, we have a program every summer that is about two and a half weeks long called "Exploring Monastic Life". It's for people who are thinking: "Maybe I would like to ordain." In other words, they haven't decided that they want to but they are thinking "Hm...maybe I should. I want to find out more about it." So they apply to come to our "Exploring monastic life" program. In the program we talk about different issues related to ordination and things that you have to work out. It's quite a wonderful program. People live together as a community. They work together so they get the experience of community life.

So these are things that you can do. Also if you are thinking of ordaining, and even if you aren't thinking of ordaining, living with the five precepts is a very beneficial practice to do. Take the five precepts to abandon killing, stealing, unwise sexual behavior, lying and intoxicants. If you cannot take all five, take 1,2,3 or 4 of them and live according to them. That's a very good way to train your mind if you are thinking of becoming a monastic. Even if you are not, it's still a very good way to train your mind, your body and your speech to live in an ethical way. And then of course you experience all the benefit of living ethically right now, and benefit from all the good karma that you create.

We'll continue tomorrow. By the way I have a few websites that you are welcome to visit. One is SravastiAbbey.org. Another is ThubtenChodron.org. The websites are updated with the different Dharma talks that I have given – audio, video or articles. There are all sorts of material on those websites and you can download the material you like.

Dedication of Merit

Let's rejoice at an opportunity well used, the fact that we listened and thought about the teachings with a good motivation. We rejoice at our own merit and that of everybody here.

We rejoice at the merit and the good deeds of all sentient beings everywhere throughout the Universe. All the merit they create by making offerings and being generous, doing prostrations, showing homage to the Three Jewels, confessing their mistakes, rejoicing in everybody's virtue, inviting their teachers to teach and requesting the Buddhas to remain in our world, being helpful to other sentient beings, doing whatever Dharma practice they do – let's rejoice at all these goodness and then dedicate it so that everybody may have conducive circumstances to practice the Dharma in this and all of their future lives.

Let's dedicate so that we may generate all the incredible noble aspirations of the bodhisattvas in our own mind. And having generated them, may we carry them out and sincerely work for the benefit of all sentient beings.

Let's dedicate that we will always meet perfectly qualified Mahayana teachers and follow their instructions, so that we'll meet the Sangha in future lives and have the opportunity to practice with them.

Let's dedicate so that all beings who are in physical or mental suffering and distress find peace and happiness, good health and harmony.

May all beings develop impartial love and compassion towards one another and realize the ultimate nature of reality and quickly become fully enlightened Buddhas.

[End]