

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

Good evening everybody! Did you do your homework? Did you see the result of being kind to family members? Keep trying each day to be kind to your family, to your colleagues, to the different people that you interact with.

Another thing to do is to try each day to praise somebody or to point out their good qualities. It's a very good practice for us because it helps us to appreciate other people's good qualities. And of course it benefits others to have their good qualities noted and appreciated because that encourages them to continue acting in a beneficial way. You are not losing anything when you praise somebody else. You are gaining something. Give it a try.

Setting a proper motivation for listening to the teaching

Let's cultivate our motivation. Let's remember the kindness of other sentient beings, that our life depends on them. Our ability to attain enlightenment also depends on them. Seeing our dependence on sentient beings, seeing their kindness towards us, develop a heart of love, compassion and altruism towards them as well.

In order to benefit them most effectively we generate bodhicitta, the aspiration for full enlightenment in order to have the wisdom, compassion and skillful means to be of the greatest benefit to all beings.

Cultivate that long range motivation in your heart.

Exchanging Self and Others

We spent some time talking about the equality of ourselves and others in wanting happiness and not wanting suffering.

We spent a good deal of time discussing the disadvantages of the self-centered thought. Remember that our self-centered thought is not us, so when we see its disadvantages we are not hating ourselves. In fact we see the disadvantages because we care about ourselves and we want to be free of that miserable self-centered thought.

And then we contemplate the benefits of cherishing others, how it brings happiness to our own mind, how it brings happiness to other living beings and how it creates the cause for us to attain all the realizations of the bodhisattvas and the Buddhas.

That leads us to the next meditation, which is called 'exchanging self and others'. In other words, right now the one we cherish the most is *me* and other people are secondary. 'Exchanging ourselves and others' means that we exchange the places of who we cherish. In the past we used to cherish ourselves first and others second, now we cherish others first and we put ourselves second.

Is there one part of you inside that's screaming: "WAIT a minute! What're you talking about, putting others first and myself second?!"

Is one part of you kind of saying that? That's the self-centered thought. When that happens, we have to go back and think about the disadvantages of self-centeredness and the benefits of cherishing others. We can then see that we actually are helping ourselves by giving up the self-centeredness. We're benefiting ourselves by benefiting others.

It's true, isn't it? When we treat others with kindness, we create good karma. Who experiences the result of the good karma we create? We do! So when we benefit others, we're also benefiting ourselves. When we harm others, we create negative karma, we're also harming ourselves. This is a very big reversal of how we usually look at things.

'Exchanging self and others' doesn't mean that I become you and you become me – a confusion of identity. It's not like that.

What it means is that we're going to see other living beings as very important in our lives. And our self-centered thought, we're going to put as second. Why should other sentient beings be important in our life? Because our entire life depends on them. If you look, everything we have, everything we know, everything we do comes because of the kindness of others and due to the influence of others.

We know how to speak because when we were little, our parents sat there and went 'gugu gaga' in front of us and taught us to pronounce all the syllables. When we were in school, our teachers taught us how to read, how to write. All the skills we have as adults, all the talents we have, we have them because others taught us, others encouraged us. If it hadn't been for people teaching and encouraging us, we would be kind of like wild animals.

Now you're going to say: "Oh, no. Never!"

Well I remember being in Bodhgaya, India one year and they had found a little girl. I think she was about four years old and somehow she had been staying with a pack of wolves instead of with her human mother and father, and she was acting like a wolf. She got the benefit of the kindness of the wolves who taught her how to behave like a wolf but she didn't learn how to behave like a human being. When we look at our lives and the advantages we have as a human being, we see that they happen because of other beings.

In order to attain enlightenment we have to develop bodhicitta. The bodhicitta depends on having love and compassion for each and every living being. If we leave out even one sentient being from the sphere of our love and compassion then it becomes impossible for us to attain Buddhahood.

Think about that! Have you ever heard of a Buddha who can't stand one sentient being? Think about it. Have you ever heard of a fully enlightened being who is still hanging on to a grudge against somebody else? Impossible!

We have to give up all the grudges, all the self-centeredness, all the parts of ourselves that want to push other beings away and instead welcome other sentient beings and see that our enlightenment as well as our happiness this life depend on them. When we see that and understand that deeply then it becomes much easier to be kind to others because we feel so close to them. We see how everything depends on them.

Now you might say: "But wait a minute. You don't know this person who harmed me. I've been hurt like nobody's ever been hurt before in the whole universe! People have hurt me. People have betrayed my trust. People have been mean and cruel to me. No one in the entire universe has ever experienced such injustice and such harm!"

That's the way we feel when we look at the harm we've received, isn't it? "I hurt more than any sentient being in the whole wide universe!" Is that true? That the mean things that you have experienced, nobody else has ever experienced anything like it? I think we exaggerate our own problems a little bit, don't we? When we look, anything that happens to us is such a big deal. We exaggerate it.

But when we look with a big mind, we'll see that we've all experienced hurt and pain and betrayal of trust and all these kinds of things. It's not like we hurt more than anybody else. It's just that we pay more attention to how we hurt and we ignore others. But in actual fact, there are other beings who have suffered much more than we have.

So we begin to really see the kindness of others and put other sentient beings first and cherish them. When we do that, the more we practice cherishing others, the happier we feel. The more we cherish others, the more we feel happiness whenever we look at any sentient being. The more we hold on to anger, then the more we look at anybody, the more we feel angry and upset and miserable. Is this true or not true in your own life?

Having the attitude that sees other beings in beauty, that sees them as lovable, that sees how much they've done for us – that mind makes us so happy! Remember yesterday when I told you about my maroon Kashmir sweater story? Seeing the happiness on Sarsha's face made me much happier than having it for myself. And I lived very well after I gave it away. I didn't die on the spot from separating from my precious sweater!

Taking and Giving Meditation

So we practice cherishing others in that way. That leads us to another meditation that I mentioned briefly before. The Tibetan term is "tong len". That translates as the 'taking and giving' meditation. This is a meditation that we do in order to enhance our love and compassion. We do this meditation after we've meditated on the disadvantages of self-centeredness and the benefits of cherishing others and after we've practiced exchanging self and others and really cherishing others as very important.

To cultivate very deep and very profound love and compassion, we practice this meditation in which we imagine taking on the suffering of others and giving others our happiness. This meditation is the exact opposite of our current way of doing things. Our current way of thinking is if there is something nice, I'll take it. If there is a problem, you can have it.

This meditation is completely changing that. The way we do this meditation is, we visualize others in front of us. When we start the meditation, we can even visualize our future self (when we're an old person) in front. Or we can imagine 1 or 2 or 5 or 10 other people or a certain group of people or a certain realm of beings. We start small and we gradually increase the number of sentient beings we imagine in front of us.

Let's start with imagining ourselves in front. Imagine yourself when you are 80 years old. Can you get an idea of how you might feel at 80 years old, what your body would be like, what your mind is like? My mum is 80. My dad's 86. It's really something watching them age and what they go through. Imagine ourselves being that old going through that.

Taking on others' suffering

We are just using ourselves as an example here. (Like I said, as we progress, we can put other sentient beings in that place.) We think about the suffering of our future self and develop compassion for that person who's so old and experiencing the misery of old age.

Because we have very deep compassion, we imagine all their pain, suffering and misery coming out of them as some kind of pollution or smoke and we imagine that we inhale that.

That doesn't mean you start coughing in your meditation. You are just imagining that others' suffering appears as smoke or pollution, something really yucky, and out of compassion you imagine taking that on. But as you take it on, it becomes like a thunder bolt.

You know how when we are very selfish, when we are very miserable, it feels like there is a stone at our heart? Have you ever felt that way? You can physically feel it sometimes when there is a lot of self-centeredness. That's why we talk about 'having a heavy heart'. I'm not talking about our beating heart. I am talking about the middle of our chest, the heart center here. Our own self-centered thought is the real enemy that makes us miserable. We imagine it here at our heart center like a rock, as something really solid.

To recap we imagine taking on others' suffering with a feeling of compassion. Their suffering comes out as pollution and changes into a thunder bolt. The thunder bolt then hits at this lump at our heart, the rock of our own self-centeredness at our heart, and it completely demolishes it. Completely!

So now there is no more rock at our heart, there is no big hindrance at our heart. Our heart feels completely open. We've taken what other beings don't want (their suffering) and we've used it to destroy what we don't want – our own self-centeredness.

This is a very important process. It's not that we take on others' suffering and then just sit there with it. What good is that? No, you use their suffering by imagining it becomes a thunder bolt. The thunder bolt destroys the cause of your own suffering – the self-centeredness, the self-grasping egoism, the self-grasping ignorance. Your whole heart becomes so open – wide open, very peaceful, very free. And you stay in that state of openness, totally free of any kind of grasping at a solid self.

You stay in that open space for a while. After that a light begins to appear in your heart. This light is the light of your own loving kindness towards others. With compassion we took on other beings' suffering, now with loving kindness we want to give them happiness.

Giving happiness to others

How are we going to give them happiness? We give sentient beings our body. We give them our possessions. We give them our virtue or our merit of the past, present and future.

Giving away our body

When we give our bodies, we imagine that our bodies are like wish-fulfilling bodies that can emanate in many different forms to become whatever or whoever other sentient beings need. We send doctors out to people who need doctors, friends to people who need friends, janitors to people who need janitors. In this way other beings receive the help they need in their life. We really imagine that and think like that.

Giving away our possessions

Similarly we imagine all our possessions as wish-fulfilling possessions that can multiply and transform into all the objects that sentient beings need. Whoever needs a washing machine, we send them a washing machine. Whoever needs a pair of socks, we send them a pair of socks. We imagine other beings receiving the things that they need. We imagine the people at Darfur receiving food and clean water. We imagine the people in Iraq receiving a safe place to live. We imagine people who are suffering from illnesses receiving medicine. So

thinking that we are able to give everything away and it becomes what others want, they receive it and get the benefit from it.

Giving away our virtue

We also imagine giving away our virtue, our good karma. We imagine that as we give it away, it becomes all the conducive circumstances for practicing the Dharma. For sentient beings who need meditation cushions, we send these out. For sentient beings who need Dharma books, we send these out. For beings who need Dharma friends, our virtue becomes Dharma friends. For beings who need Dharma teachers, our virtue goes out and becomes Dharma teachers. We send out all the conducive circumstances – a nice place to practice, food to sustain a retreat and so on so that they are able to practice the Dharma and attain the realizations.

So now instead of being angry sentient beings, they have the realization of patience. Instead of being greedy, they have the realization of impermanence. Instead of being depressed, they have the realization of the precious human life. Instead of feeling forlorn, they have the realization of taking refuge in the Three Jewels. Instead of being confused about their ethical conduct they realize ethical discipline. Instead of having scattered minds, they all generate *samadhi*, single-pointed concentration. Instead of suffering from self-grasping ignorance they now have the wisdom that realizes emptiness.

In summary we imagine giving away all our virtue which becomes what other beings need in order to practice the Dharma. We imagine that having received what they need, they practice the Dharma and gain all the realizations of the gradual path to enlightenment and become fully enlightened Buddhas.

This is a very beautiful meditation because it starts out thinking of beings in a suffering state and it ends with them becoming Buddhas.

The meditation in brief

Like I was saying, if we start out the meditation with ourselves we think of the kind of suffering we're going to have when we are 80 years old – physical, mental and emotional suffering, suffering of ageing, suffering of being lonely or being afraid of death or other people ignoring you etc, and we imagine that we take that suffering away from our 80-year-old self.

We take it away in the form of pollution. It becomes a thunder bolt which hits at the lump of our self-centeredness at our heart. That is completely demolished. We stay in that empty space not grasping at a self. After a while a light appears within that space and radiates out. As the light radiates out we imagine being able to give to our 80-year-old self whatever is needed – our body multiplies and becomes whoever our 80-year-old self need, our possessions multiply and transform into whatever our 80-year-old self need, our virtue is transformed into all the conducive circumstances for our 80-year-old self to practice the Dharma, gain all the realizations of the path and become a Buddha.

At the end of the meditation of course you feel quite happy, don't you?

So we might start out with our 80-year-old self and after that do the meditation for some friends or relatives or for strangers. Some people have a lot of compassion for animals so they might think of various animals and do it for them. Or you have compassion for the hungry ghosts so you imagine taking on the suffering of the hungry ghosts and giving them your body, wealth and virtue. Or you imagine the *dukka* or the unsatisfactory conditions of

the gods, the celestial beings. So we do this for all sentient beings and it becomes quite a beautiful meditation.

Generating bodhicitta

The taking and giving meditation then leads us to generate bodhicitta. The taking and giving meditation makes our love and compassion extremely strong. When we have such strong love and compassion, we think: "Well, who can best benefit sentient beings? Who is capable of being of the greatest benefit to others?" We see that the Buddhas have that capability because they've eliminated all the defilements from their mind and developed all the external qualities. They have many different psychic powers and abilities to bring great benefit to others. Therefore we too generate that very strong aspiration to become a fully enlightened Buddha for the benefit of all beings. This is the bodhicitta motivation.

If you want a much more in-depth explanation of the 'taking and giving' meditation, one of my teachers, Geshe Jampa Tegchok wrote a book that's called 'Transforming Adversity into Joy and Courage' published by Snow Lion Publications in the U.S.. It's a very wonderful book and Chapter 11 in that book has a very extensive explanation of the 'taking and giving' meditation.

The Text

We will now continue with Chapter 3. We have finished up to Verse 21. Verses 22 and 23 are talking about the generation of bodhicitta and the taking of the bodhisattva vows. Some of you who are doing the Six-session Guru Yoga will recognize these verses and a few of the subsequent verses because some parts of the Six-session Guru Yoga were extracted from Shantideva's work.

Chapter 3, Verse 22:

Just as the Sugatas of old adopted the Spirit of Awakening, and just as they properly conformed to the practice of the bodhisattvas,

Chapter 3, Verse 23:

So I myself shall generate the Spirit of Awakening for the sake of the world; and so I myself shall properly engage in those practices.

The English translation for 'Sugata' is 'Those gone to bliss' or 'The blissfully gone ones'. It is another epitaph for the Buddha because Buddhas experience great bliss.

'The Sugatas of old' means the previous Buddhas.

'The Spirit of Awakening' is the bodhicitta.

'Just as the previous Buddhas not only generated bodhicitta but they also practice all the deeds of a bodhisattva': they not only had the wish to become a Buddha for the benefit of sentient beings but they actually practice the causes that would lead them to full enlightenment – all the bodhisattva practices.

Verse 23 says just as the previous Buddhas did all of that, I am going to do the same thing. So Verse 23 says: I myself shall generate the spirit of awakening, the bodhicitta for the sake of the world. I myself shall properly engage in those practices.

What we're essentially saying here is all the previous Buddhas were able to attain Buddhahood by generating the bodhicitta and doing all the bodhisattva practices. Just as they practiced it and achieved the resultant Buddhahood I know that if I practice it I too will

attain the resultant Buddhahood, so I am making the commitment and the determination now to generate the bodhicitta and to attain full enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings.

That's the meaning of that verse. These two verses are very powerful. If you've already taken the bodhisattvas vows, it is very good to take them again yourself every morning and every evening. You can do that by visualizing the Buddha surrounded by all the other Buddhas and bodhisattvas in the space in front of you and then reciting these two verses. And then imagining that you are really retaking the bodhisattvas vows and strengthening your bodhicitta. These two verses are quite important. They're like the essence of the whole chapter.

Chapter 3, Verse 24:

Upon gladly adopting the Spirit of Awakening in this way, an intelligent person should thus nurture the Spirit in order to fulfill his wish.

After we have generated bodhicitta, an intelligent person would want to nurture their bodhicitta in order to fulfill their wish. In other words, an intelligent person isn't content to just say: "I aspire to become a Buddha for benefit of sentient beings." An intelligent person is going to nourish that aspiration and that wish so that it motivates them to do all the practices necessary to become a fully enlightened Buddha. The rest of the text explains all those practices. Until now we have been generating bodhicitta. The rest of the Chapter will explain how to actually practice in order to attain full enlightenment once you've generated that very noble aspiration.

Chapter 3, Verse 25:

Now my life is fruitful. Human existence is well obtained. Today I have been born into the family of the Buddhas. Now I am a Child of the Buddhas.

This verse is a verse of rejoicing. What this is saying is: 'Today my life has meaning. Everything that I've done in my life now has some kind of purpose. Because it's led me to this point where I can generate the very noble mind of bodhicitta. Now my life really has some meaning because I've decided to dedicate it to the most noble thing possible – attaining enlightenment for the benefit of all beings.'

So we really rejoice: 'How wonderful that I have done this! How wonderful that my life now has some meaning.' It has exquisite meaning at this point. So we really rejoice. When it says 'human existence is well obtained', it means 'now there is a purpose for my having been alive all these years as a human being. There is now a purpose for my mum and dad having had me, for their having had to go through so much difficulty to raise me as a child, feed me, teach me how to behave and give me an education. My parents sacrificed so much and now there is a great meaning behind the kindness that they showed me because I've been able to do something so meaningful with my life by generating bodhicitta.'

'Today, I have been born into the family of the Buddhas.' What this means is just as a King and Queen have children – the Princes and the Princesses that are trained to become the King and Queen when they're grown up, so now by generating the bodhicitta, we have become a bodhisattva and as we continue to practice we can grow up in the Dharma and become fully enlightened Buddhas. That's what it means in saying 'to become a child of the Buddhas'. Because in the olden days when they had Kings and Queens and Princes and Princesses, you practice to become like your parents.

Here as the child of the Buddha, we're going to practice in order to become fully enlightened Buddhas. We hear some other religions talk about being born again. This is the Buddhist version of being born again except instead of getting born again in samsara, we were born again as a child of the Buddha because we've generated bodhicitta.

Chapter 3, Verse 26:

Thus, whatever I do now should accord with [the Bodhisattvas'] family, and it should not be like a stain on this pure family.

When you are part of a family, you know that your behavior reflects on the entire family. If you misbehave it causes other family members embarrassment. So out of consideration for them you behave properly because you cherish your family and your other family members.

Here too we are saying: "I have been born as a child of the Buddha. So now whatever I do should conform to the actions that a child of the Buddha should do. I shouldn't act like a self-pitying spoilt brad anymore. I really need to stop complaining. I need to stop whining. I need to start practicing as a kind person because now I've taken this pledge to become a Buddha for the benefit of all sentient beings and I am born into the family of the Buddhas so I should act properly and not be a stain on the pure family. So not going around saying and doing all sorts of outlandish things that make people lose faith in the bodhisattva path or make them lose faith in the Buddha Dharma.

Chapter 3, Verse 27:

Just as a blind man might find a jewel amongst heaps of rubbish, so this Spirit of Awakening has somehow arisen in me.

How likely is it for a blind person to find a jewel in a heap of rubbish? Very hard! Here we are marveling at how incredible that somebody like me who is usually so overwhelmed by ignorance, anger and attachment have generated the bodhicitta! It seems miraculous!

We are like the blind person. The heap of rubbish is like our samsara, our cyclic existence, all of our ignorance, anger and attachment. The jewel that the blind person finds is the bodhicitta. We found this bodhicitta in the midst of our overwhelming suffering and confusion in cyclic existence. How incredibly precious and rare this is! We should feel very happy after we generate bodhicitta.

Chapter 3, Verse 28:

It is the elixir of life produced to vanquish death in the world. It is an inexhaustible treasure eliminating the poverty of the world.

"It" here refers to bodhicitta; "it's the elixir of life produced to vanquish death in the world". When we generate bodhicitta, we have such strong intention to become a Buddha that it will lead us to free ourselves from cyclic existence. When we have freed ourselves from cyclic existence there is no longer birth and death in this samsaric world. That's what it means "to vanquish death in this world". We are on the path now to being liberated from cyclic existence.

'Bodhicitta is like an inexhaustible treasure eliminating the poverty of the world.' We usually wonder what would eliminate poverty? Just printing more money or giving people gold or whatever? But that's not exactly it because sentient beings suffer from ignorance, anger and attachment. They suffer due to their own harmful karma. If we want to free them from suffering, we have to free them from their mental afflictions and from all the karma that causes rebirth.

The bodhicitta becomes like an inexhaustible treasure that eliminates the poverty of cyclic existence. It will eliminate all the suffering, all the feeling of lack, all the discontent and dissatisfaction of cyclic existence.

How does bodhicitta eliminate that? Well a person who generates bodhicitta has a very joyful mind because they have so much meaning and purpose in their life. And by the force of their practice, they will become a Buddha and they will be able to instruct other living beings on the path. They can instruct other living beings according to their disposition, their nature, explaining Dharma in a way that is suitable for each particular living being. In that way, the Buddhas and bodhisattvas are able to end the poverty of the world and the misery of the world.

Chapter 3, Verse 29:

It is the supreme medicine that alleviates the illness of the world. It is the tree of rest for beings exhausted from wandering on the pathways of mundane existence.

'Bodhicitta is the medicine that alleviates the illness of the world.' Bodhicitta frees us from mental suffering. It helps us to create all the good karma that frees us from physical suffering. It leads other living beings on the path to liberation as well. In that way, it eliminates all the illnesses of the world.

'It also becomes like a tree of rest for beings exhausted from wandering on the pathways of mundane existence.' We sentient beings are always getting born and reborn, born and reborn... We have this life and the next life and the next life and the next life... At some point when we see this whole situation we are in, we just have this feeling of overwhelming weariness: "What point is it? To get born and reborn in cyclic existence. It just doesn't make any sense! I'm exhausted by cyclic existence. I want liberation! I want enlightenment!"

Just as a person who has been walking a long time wants to rest under a tree, somebody who's been wandering in cyclic existence for a long time takes a rest under the tree of bodhicitta. Bodhicitta becomes what shelters and protects them, where they can rest.

Chapter 3, Verse 30:

It is the universal bridge for all travelers on their crossing over miserable states of existence. It is the rising moon of the mind that soothes the mental afflictions of the world.

Travelers very often need bridges to cross over chasms, to cross over valleys or rivers or whatever. Bodhicitta is like the bridge for all migrating beings who have been traveling in cyclic existence who now want to cross the ocean of samsara and arrive on the other side, the other shore. The other shore being enlightenment. Bodhicitta is the bridge that takes them over this ocean of cyclic existence to the other side, the enlightened state.

Bodhicitta is like the rising moon. When the full moon rises in the sky, there is such an incredible sense of peace and coolness and calm, isn't there? I don't know how well you can see the moon rising in the sky in Singapore. You have so many skyscrapers here, you can't see the horizon and sometimes it's cloudy. But at the abbey where I live, we often have very clear nights and when there is a full moon, you can watch the full moon come up over the horizon. We live in a very tranquil place, so it's very still, very quiet and when the moon comes up over the horizon, it looks much larger than it usually looks when it's high above. It's just incredible to watch the full moon rise like that. It has a very cooling, healing, peaceful energy because it's so quiet and still.

In the same way the bodhicitta is like the moon that comes up that just spreads peace and a very gentle light and eases the heat of anger and greed in the minds of sentient beings. It's a very beautiful analogy. So now whenever you look at the moon in the sky, think of bodhicitta. It's a good way to help you remember bodhicitta.

Chapter 3, Verse 31:

It is the great sun dispelling the darkness of the world's ignorance. It is the fresh butter formed from churning the milk of Dharma.

This is another analogy. When the sun comes up all the darkness of the evening dissipates. In the same way when the sun of the bodhicitta arises in our mind it's going to make the darkness of our ignorance vanish. Bodhicitta doesn't directly counteract ignorance, it's only the wisdom that realizes emptiness that directly counteracts the ignorance. But the bodhicitta gives us incredibly strong motivation to meditate on emptiness and generate that very special wisdom. It's in that way that bodhicitta is said to be like the sun that dispels the darkness of the world's ignorance because it spurs us to meditate on emptiness.

"It's like the fresh butter that forms when you churn the milk of the Dharma." I don't know how many of you have ever seen people churning milk? It takes a long time to churn milk. All the butter then rises to the top. All the fat of the milk rises to the top. The fat, the butter, the cream of the milk is often coveted as the nicest part because it is very rich, very smooth like that. This is not for people who like non-fat stuff. This was written before we knew about cholesterol and everything else. [laughter]

Bodhicitta is the fresh butter formed from churning the milk of the Dharma. Just as butter is the cream of the milk, what is the most delicious part of all the Buddhas' teachings? What is the creamiest, most precious part? It's the bodhicitta mind, the aspiration for enlightenment.

Chapter 3, Verse 32:

For the caravan of beings traveling on the path of mundane existence and starving for the meal of happiness, it is the feast of happiness that satisfies all sentient beings who have come as guests.

You imagine all these sentient beings, caravans of sentient beings who have been revolving in cyclic existence – travelers, migrators – up and down, up and down and up and down in cyclic existence. They have been traveling so much that they are starving for happiness just like all the sentient beings around us were starving for happiness. Bodhicitta becomes like the meal that you invite all the starving, weary travelers to come to.

All these beings who're starving for happiness in cyclic existence, you invite them to this incredible banquet of bodhicitta because it is going to bring them all the happiness. Your generating bodhicitta is going to enable you to benefit so many living beings who would never have been able to receive benefit otherwise. You are inviting them to this banquet at which they can get nourished. You are inviting all the sentient beings: "Please come to this banquet. I am going to serve you bodhicitta where you will have such a delicious meal that brings you great happiness."

Chapter 3, Verse 33:

Today I invite the world to Sugatahood and temporal happiness. May the gods, asuras, and others rejoice in the presence of all the Protectors!

Here we are saying: "Today I am taking responsibility. I generated the bodhicitta. I am inviting all these sentient beings who are weary and exhausted and starving for happiness, I'm inviting them all to Sugatahood (Buddhahood) and I am inviting them all to this feast where they can also have temporal happiness because now with bodhicitta I am going to work for their temporal happiness and I am going to work for their Buddhahood."

Temporal happiness is all the happiness that sentient beings have while they are still in cyclic existence revolving in all the different realms. Their ultimate happiness is the happiness of liberation and enlightenment. By generating bodhicitta we've decided that we're dedicating this life and all our future lives to this most noble, highest and miraculous state of being and purpose and meaning. We are inviting all the sentient beings to come and partake of this. May the gods, may all the deva – the celestial beings, may they rejoice. May the *asuras* (demi-gods) rejoice. May all other living beings also rejoice and may we all rejoice in the presence of all the protectors, in other words, in the presence of all the Buddhas.

This chapter ends on a very uplifting note, doesn't it? We've generated bodhicitta. We've made our lives meaningful. We've invited all sentient beings to this feast of happiness to celebrate with us because we've now become a child of the Buddha. We're going to grow up and do the work of the Buddha.

That's the conclusion of Chapter 3. This text is so precious, so beautiful. It's one of the greatest Mahayana teachings and quite special. As we progress and go deeper into the other chapters in this book, you will see how amazing Shantideva is when he wrote this book.

Questions and Answers

Q: One of the precepts is not to kill. If we eat meat are we killing the animals? How do I encourage people to be vegetarian?

VTC: The way that they usually speak of the first precept regarding eating meat is to not eat meat if you kill the animal yourself, or if you ask somebody else to kill it for you, or if you know that somebody else has killed it specifically for you.

In other words, if there is some personal involvement in the death of the animal then it's considered killing.

Now the question comes: what about if you didn't kill the animal and somebody else did and it's just packaged and sitting in the supermarket? My personal feeling is that it's not completely karma-free because of supply and demand. Although you weren't personally involved in the killing, if you buy meat at the supermarket it creates the demand for more beings to be killed, for more meat to be produced.

I would recommend if you can, to not eat meat unless you have to for health reasons, in which case really pray for the lives of the beings who are giving up their lives so that you can eat meat.

I was raised in a family where we ate a lot of meat everyday. One time when I was traveling, I was in Germany and we got some sausage and we were cooking it, we're camping. When we cut into it to eat it, all this blood came out. And it was at that moment that it hit me that when I eat meat I am eating somebody's else body! I thought: "Would I

want to die so that somebody else could eat my body? No.” And then the question came: “Why should I ask other living beings to die so that I can eat their body?”

If you can become vegetarian it's very good. If you can't then do pray for the well-being of those animals and fish or whatever that have given up their lives so that you can eat.

Q: In your book on Tara “How to free your mind”, it's said that you can pray to Tara for wealth and Tara will grant you wealth. But we're also encouraged as Buddhists not to be attached to wealth so why are we praying to Tara to grant us wealth? Actually one of my friends has been praying to Tara for years for wealth and still it doesn't happen. Why hasn't Tara granted her wishes?

VTC: When it says that Tara grants wealth, it doesn't mean just physical wealth – money and material possessions. The real wealth is the wealth of the Dharma. When we are praying to Tara and making requests for wealth, we want our mind to be rich with the Dharma. We want our mind to be rich with renunciation. Rich with wisdom. Rich with patience, love and compassion.

You can also request Tara to help with material things or worldly things. But when you do you need to have a very good motivation. If you're just praying for wealth so that you can be rich and famous and lie at the beach all day and not have to work that's not a very good motivation. An example of a proper motivation for praying to Tara for wealth would be: “I want to be able to practice the Dharma and I need some savings to be able to go on retreats.” Or a monastery or a temple wants to expand so that other people can come and practice the Dharma there, so they request Tara to help also on a mundane level. The motivation is one that's not selfish and it's for the benefit of various living beings.

Sometimes we may pray for something but our wish is not granted. Well that is because we have not created the karma to receive wealth. It's not that Tara or any of Buddhas are some kind of creator god and if we please them they will give us a lot of money. The basic tenet of Buddhist teachings is cause and effect. The results we experience come due to the causes that we create. If we want wealth we have to practice generosity. If we don't practice generosity then just praying to Tara to be wealthy is not going to work because we have not planted the karmic seed in our own mindstream to receive that wealth.

Q: The five precepts don't include gambling. Does this mean that gambling is not a negativity?

VTC: No. Gambling is something quite negative. There are many actions not included in the five precepts that are negative and good to abandon. But I think the Buddha listed only five because those were the five most important ones. It does not mean that you can go out, gamble and lose all your family's wealth. That's not what that means.

Q: Karma and cause and effect is one of the main tenets of Buddhism. But it seems to me that if you look at things in terms of karma, things become quite mechanical. My question is does grace have any place in that?

VTC: ‘Grace’ is not a word that you hear in Buddhism. ‘Grace’ is more of a Christian concept. In Buddhism sometimes we talk about blessings, receiving the blessings of the Buddha. But ‘blessing’ does not mean some kind of magical something. Receiving the blessings of the Buddha means that our mind has been transformed. Our mind being transformed happens not only because of what the Buddhas do but because of what we do.

The Buddhist path very much teaches that we have to be responsible and we have to act. There are Buddhas, bodhisattvas and holy beings who can help us. But they can't help us unless we do something. We can't just sit back and go: "Buddha I want to be rich! I want to become a Buddha! Please make me rich and make me a Buddha by tomorrow morning! And in the meantime I am going to take a good long sleep. And you do all the work Buddha!"

That's not going to work. Why? That state of mind is completely self-absorbed! It's not really caring about Buddhahood. It's not caring about other sentient beings. It's not being generous. And so even though we pray, we have no water and fertilizer for the Buddha to work with. We have to create the good karma ourselves and then the Buddha's blessings can come into our mind and help to ripen that karma, help our wisdom and our compassion to ripen and those realizations to grow in our heart.

Q: I prostrate when I am in a temple but I don't prostrate at home where my mum has a Guan Yin statue. Should I consider prostrating when I go home everyday because there is a Guan Yin statue there?

VTC: What I would recommend doing and what I do myself is first thing every morning when I wake up, I imagine the Buddha in front of me and I make three prostrations. Every evening before I go to bed I make three prostrations before I lie down to go to sleep. So the prostrations frame your day. You bow to the Buddha in the morning, you bow in the evening. I would recommend doing that.

If you have an altar or a statue at home you can bow in front of it because that statue or picture reminds you of the Buddha's qualities.

Should you bow when you come home everyday? It could be a very nice practice for you to bow to Guan Yin before going about doing what you need to do because when you come in and you bow to Guan Yin you're remembering Guan Yin's compassion and so you're remembering "I want to be compassionate like Guan Yin". That process of just remembering the Buddhas and bodhisattvas and their qualities can actually inspire our own mind and help us be kinder people when we are at home dealing with our family and so on. So yes I think you could certainly consider bowing to Guan Yin when you get home each day.

It's also a nice practice to make offerings if you have a shrine at home. Making offerings first thing in the morning. You're creating generosity by offering water, offering food, something like this. It's a very nice practice to do and it cultivates a spirit of generosity in our own mind. If people want more information on this, in my book "Guided Meditation on the Stages of the Path", it talks about how to set up an altar and it talks about how to make offerings.

Q: How do we apply justice and equality to daily life? Does justice mean equal treatment for all? That's difficult.

VTC: 'Justice' is an interesting idea. I've not heard that word used particularly in Buddhism. And I don't know of any Pali or Sanskrit or Chinese or Tibetan word that you find in the Buddhist context that translates as justice. I think it might be a very interesting idea to have a discussion about what we think justice means. There are many different ideas about justice.

Does justice mean equal treatment to all? Does it mean that you treat an adult like you treat a child? Does justice mean that kind of equal treatment? That you treat an adult the same way you treat a child? I don't think so. Does justice mean that you treat your teacher

the same way as you treat your boyfriend? I hope not! We still treat people differently according to the various social roles that we have.

The Buddhist concept of equanimity means that we want everybody to be equally happy and we want everybody to be equally free of suffering. In other words, we don't play favorite, wanting some people to be happy but wanting others to suffer. Or that these animals and insects can be happy and those ones can suffer. The kind of equanimity that we are talking about in Buddhism is the equanimity of wishing everybody well.

But we do treat people differently because they are different. We can still wish them well and wish them to be equally free of suffering although we may treat them differently because of the different social roles that we play in relation to them.

Q: I see the importance of benefiting sentient beings and that's very noble. But I don't see the importance of enlightenment. Why is attaining enlightenment a worthy goal?

VTC: That's because when we have attained the full enlightenment of a Buddha, we are in the best position to benefit sentient beings. If you see the importance of benefiting sentient beings, if you really want to benefit sentient beings then you will naturally ask: "Well how can I best benefit them? Does that mean that I just have to go to the university and learn everything that they teach at university because sentient beings need all the different kinds of knowledge?" But then you think: "Who benefits sentient beings more? An engineer or the Buddha?"

If you are an engineer, can you lead sentient beings to enlightenment? If you are a doctor, can you lead sentient beings to enlightenment? We see that all these other fields are very good and they can be of some temporal benefit to sentient beings in samsara. But in terms of leading sentient beings to enlightenment, the best way to do that and really the only way to do that is if we have become fully enlightened Buddhas ourselves.

If we really want sentient beings to have the happiness that is free from all the suffering of being born in cyclic existence then we have to know the path to enlightenment; we have to actualize that path to enlightenment in our own mind so that we can teach it properly to others and so that we can guide them on that path. That's why attaining enlightenment is really important.

Also, as a Buddha, like I was saying before, you have the power to emanate many different kinds of bodies so it becomes much easier to benefit others. You can emanate many bodies that can teach them, guide them and lead them on the path.

That concludes this series of talks on "A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life" by the Indian Sage Shantideva. Like I said, we will continue the next time I come but you have to study and practice them between now and then. Will you do that? Don't expect me to come if you're not willing to practice. Really! If you don't practice, why should I come and teach it? I don't sit on the plane and get jet lagged because I like it. I do that because I have some confidence that you're going to take these teachings to heart and practice them and benefit from them. So please continue to practice.

Dedication of Merit

Let's take a moment and rejoice that we are able to spend these four days together learning about the bodhisattva practice. Let's rejoice that we even contacted this incredible text by Shantideva. And let's rejoice at our own and others' virtue in the past, present and future.

And rejoice at the virtue of all those beings who've generated bodhicitta and who do the bodhisattvas' actions. Let's dedicate so that we too may generate the bodhicitta just as they did and practice the bodhisattva deeds just as they did. And let's imagine all of our virtue as a light at our heart that we shine out to all sentient beings, really wanting them to have all temporal happiness in samsara and the ultimate happiness of full enlightenment.

*Due to this merit may we soon attain the enlightened state of guru Buddha
That we may be able to liberate all sentient beings from their suffering
May the precious Bodhi mind not yet born arise and grow
May that born have no decline but increase forever more.*

[The End.]