

Shantideva's
Bodhicaryâvatâra
བྱང་ཆུབ་སེམས་པའི་སྤོན་པ་ལ་འཇུག་པ།

Group Study with Venerable Lama Sangyay Tendzin
Session 12 – April 10, 2021
Chapter Two (followed)

Good morning,

Greetings to each of you, in the monastic community, upasikas, upasakas and Dharma practitioners. Let's make the wish that we may continue and reach the completion of the present webinar without encountering obstacle.

Clearly one of the positive aspects of the current pandemic, is that most of us have become more familiar with the communication technologies. Allowing us to bypass the limitations of place and time. This has given us the means to engage in the deeper study of essential Buddhist scriptures such as the Bodhicaryâvatâra.

I pray that each of us gain some benefit all along as we progress steadily through this study and practice. May you soon experience the blissful felicity of higher samadhi and wisdom. Such achievement comes from genuine abandonment and reliance on the three root and three jewels with a mind turned towards the practice of dedicated Bodhicitta.

The activity we are about to engage, that of listening to the precious Dharma, is of great importance as it connects us to our true nature. Therefore, let us start it with the traditional recitations of Refuge, Bodhicitta, Mandala offering and Requesting the precious teachings.

REFUGE – MANDALA - REQUEST
Lama's invocation – Calm abiding

Last week, we ended with the sloka 23, concluding the various offerings by that of melodious praise. All these numerous offerings open our mind considerably and allow us to accumulate extraordinary merit.

Such merit is indispensable in order to bring about closeness with the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas so that we may engage in the confession of our negative actions. It is not just formalism but is about being authentic.

Next, we generate veneration showing our appreciation, devotion and respect towards the recipients of our confession of negativity.

Chapter Two - Stanza 24:

I prostrate to all you Buddhas who have graced the three times,
To the Dharma and to you, the Highest Assembly,
Bowing down with bodies as numerous
As all the atoms of the world.

In this verse, Shantideva invites us to prostrate to the Buddhas of the three times and ten directions. Similarly, to prostrate to the precious Dharma of transmission and realization, and finally, to prostrate to the Noble Sangha, the assembly of those aspiring to virtue, who never forsake it once it has been gained.

Doing so, he visualises himself with as many bodies as there are grains of dust in a trichiliocosme.

How does he prostrate? The commentary describes this at length:

He does full prostrations, reverently placing his joined palms to the three doors and bowing down onto the floor, he touches it with his hands, knees, and forehead in full stretch of his body. While doing so, he recites the liturgy and respectfully recalls all the qualities of the Three Jewels.

And he doesn't do this mindlessly: Here is how we should do prostrations:

As we place our hands successively to the crown of our heads, to our throats, and to our hearts, we call to mind the qualities of the body, speech, and mind of the Tathagatas, and as we prostrate to them, we make the wish that beings purify their physical, verbal, and mental defilements and gain the invisible "Ushnikha" upon their heads, the Dharma-Conch of enlightened speech, and the Endless Knot of the enlightened mind.

Then our five limbs make contact with the ground:

- As our right knee touches the ground, we should wish and say, in conformity with the sutra, "May all beings proceed upon the right-hand path of integrity."
- As our left knee touches it, we should wish and say, "May all who are on the left-hand path of falsehood enter the true and noble path."
- When our right hand touches the ground, we should wish and say, "Just as when the Buddha, seated under the bodhi tree, pressed the ground with his right hand subduing all negative forces and gaining enlightenment, may all beings overcome evil and adversity, and sitting under the bodhi tree, may they also press the earth with their hands and attain the primordial wisdom of Buddhahood."
- When our left hand touches the ground, we should wish and say, "May I, by means of the four ways of attracting disciples, gather to myself all beings who are lost in the ordinary state of spiritual immaturity, who cling to negativity, and who are hard to benefit."
- When our face and forehead touch the ground, we should wish and say, "May beings, divested of their pride, serve their teachers, gain the invisible "ushnikha", and be endowed with every virtuous quality."

There is much more to it, however, I think that this will be sufficient for now. Studying this much and practicing it will be of great benefit.

Chapter Two - Stanza 25:

I prostrate to you bases for the Bodhichitta aim
And to your stupa monuments.

I prostrate to you abbots and likewise to you ordaining masters,
And to you, supreme upholders of tamed behaviour.

Doing so, he bows down to all the supports of Bodhichitta.

He bows to stupas and whatever representations of the enlightened body, speech, and mind exist.

Likewise, we bow down and prostrate to all teachers:

- The preceptors of the vinaya vows of individual liberation.
- Those who give reading transmissions and,
- Those who instruct the ordained community of bhikshus and shramaneras; and even
- Those who teach people how to read and therefore access to studying the precious Dharma.

We, bow down to the supreme Dharma practitioners who have renounce their old ways and embraced a new way of life: to the sangha of the yogis, as well as to the sangha of monastics, and even to those who merely assume the outward demeanour of Buddha's disciples.

Of the different kinds of homage (physical, verbal, and mental), the mental homage is predominantly important. Consequently, a single prostration performed with mindfulness is of much greater benefit than many prostrations performed under the sway of distraction.

When the bodily posture is straight, the subtle channels are also straight, as are also the wind-energies and the mind. Therefore, with these four items straight, we should visualize our father on our right, our mother on our left, our enemies and obstacle-makers in front, and on all sides beings as numerous as the particles of dust upon the face of the earth.

There are many more instructions given in the commentaries on making prostrations and taking Refuge. This subject is vast and profound. It would be of little benefit to engage these topics here now. Nevertheless, I will do so during the coming intensive meditation Seminar & Retreat based on the short practice of white Tara that will be held in June this year.

Chapter Two - Stanza 26:

Till I reach the heart of a purified state,
I take safe direction from you Buddhas.
Likewise, I take safe direction from the Dharma
And from you, the Assembly of bodhisattvas.

Shantideva commits to follow the Buddha as a teacher, the Dharma as a guardian and the Sangha as leaders on the Path.

Shantideva take refuge in the Buddhas who possess the four kayas and the five wisdoms. We take refuge with the wish that all beings, innumerable as the sky is vast, attain perfect Buddhahood and we do so until we have gained ultimate enlightenment ourselves.

In the same way, we take refuge in the sublime Dharma of transmission and realization, as well as in the noble Sangha of the Bodhisattvas.

We take refuge, until we too attain perfect enlightenment for the sake of beings, outwardly under a Bodhi tree and until, inwardly, our awareness, the Buddha essence, becomes manifest in its natural state.

Buddhahood is not altered through causes and conditions; its qualities are spontaneously accomplished. Neither is it realized through extrinsic circumstances; it is directly realized through self-cognizing awareness.

Chapter Two - Stanza 27:

With palms pressed together,
I beseech You Buddhas and bodhisattvas
Residing in every direction,
Possessing great compassion:

In the sky in front of himself, Shantideva visualizes the object of confession: all the perfect Buddhas, victorious, virtuous and transcendent, together with all the great Bodhisattvas, who reside in the infinite buddha fields in the ten directions and who are the sovereigns of great compassion. He prays to them with his palms pressed together.

As you some of you know, confession implies to rely on four strengths:

1. the strength of declaring that one has done wrong.
2. the strength of the support.
3. the strength of amendment.
4. the strength of the remedial practice.

The next three verses address the first strength, the strength of declaring that one has done wrong.

Chapter Two - Stanza 28:

Throughout my beginningless samsaric existence,
In this and other lives,
I've unwittingly committed negative acts
Or caused others to commit (them), and further,

Shantideva admits that in this and all his former lives, while wandering in beginningless samsara, ignorant of what actions were to be adopted and what were to be rejected, under the power of conflicting emotions, he perpetrated three kinds of evil deed:

- He performed actions that were evil by their nature.
- He transgressed the rules of discipline.
- He incited others to do the same.

Chapter Two - Stanza 29:

Oppressed by the confusion of naivety,
I've rejoiced in them – whatever I've done,
I see them as mistakes and openly admit them
To you, my Guardians, from the depths of my heart.

Deceived and oppressed by ignorance of the law of karma cause and effect and confuse on the choice to be made between things to be done and things to be avoided, Shantideva admits that he rejoiced in the evil committed by others.

But now, seeing and acknowledging that these three kinds of erroneous conduct, whether serious or trivial, were indeed wrong, he openly confesses them—not just verbally, but sincerely from his heart. In the presence of the great protectors, the Buddhas and their Bodhisattva offspring, he promises to refrain from them in the future.

Chapter Two - Stanza 30:

Whatever harmful actions of body, speech and mind
I've committed out of disturbing emotion
Toward you Three Supreme Gems, my fathers, my mothers,
My spiritual mentors or others,

In particular, Shantideva confesses the most serious faults he has committed with reference to

- The "field of Excellence" i.e.: The Three Jewels of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. And to,
- The "field of Benefit": his father, mother, and all who, rich in good qualities are worthy of praise, such as learned spiritual masters, but also all teachers.

He confesses all the faults he has committed out of attachment, aversion, and ignorance:

- Physically, by killing, destroying, and beating.
- Verbally, by criticism, slander, and evil speech.
- Mentally, through wrong views, malevolence, and so on.

Then comes the strength of the support.

Chapter Two - Stanza 31:

And whatever extremely unbearable base actions I've done
I, who am full of negative force
That gives rise to faults through many wrong actions
I openly admit all of them to you Spiritual Leaders.

In the presence of his teachers, in the presence of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, Shantideva goes on to confess openly and one by one all the evil deeds that he, an old sinner, has committed in thought, word, and deed, and which cling to his mind as rust sticks to iron, unbearably severe faults, which could result in being reborn in hell.

Why is it necessary to confess our faults swiftly? It is because we have no idea of when we shall die. The circumstances of death are uncertain and there is no certainty that we will not die today. Moreover, the suffering experienced at the moment of death when life is severed, the suffering that occurs after death in the bardo, and the sufferings of the lower realms in the existence to follow, are all the results of negative action.

Chapter Two - Stanza 32:

But I may be snatched from my life
Before cleansing myself of my negative forces of karma.
Just as then I may fall to a horrible rebirth, I beseech you for safe direction
To free myself definitely from that, with the swiftest of means.

This being so, Shantideva says, it may be that he will die before completing his confession, without feeling remorse for evils committed in the past, without making a resolution to abstain from such actions in the future, and without striving in positive actions, the antidote to evil.

If this were to occur, he would be obliged to experience the pains of the lower realms, and what means would there be for his mind ever to be freed from them? Therefore, Shantideva prays that the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas swiftly grant him their protection.

Chapter Two - Stanza 33:

Whether or not I've done purification,
Since this Lord of Death, who can't be trusted, never will wait,
Everyone, whether sick or not, dies all of a sudden.
My life can't be trusted.

We might well think that, although we have to die someday it does not matter if there is no time today for the confession of our sins—we won't die without confession. But Yama, the Lord of Death, is not to be trusted. He will not wait for us to finish what we have started (our confession, for instance), and he will not wait for us to do what we have planned but have not yet begun.

Life is uncertain and the confident trust that we shall not die today is quite misplaced. Since there is no saying when, where, and how death may occur.

Chapter Two - Stanza 34:

Leaving all behind, I'll depart.
But not having realized this,
I've committed all sorts of negative acts
For the sake of my friends and my foes.

When death arrives, we must leave everything behind: our home, our country, relatives and companions, our community, enemies and friends, family and possessions, clothes and sustenance, even our own bodies. We go forth into the next life completely alone.

Shantideva confesses, however, that, forgetful of this; and in order to protect his family and those who are close to him (acquaintances, friends, and the people he likes), and in order to get the better of his enemies, he has committed many evils through attachment and aversion, killing, stealing, and so on. All of this has been so pointless.

Chapter Two - Stanza 35:

My foes will vanish.
My friends also will vanish.
I too shall vanish.
Likewise, all will vanish.

For even if he has failed to overcome them, his enemies will die in any case and cease to exist. Even if he is successful in guarding and caring for his friends and loved ones, nothing is achieved; they too will vanish in death. And he himself will die and cease to be.

The entire universe, with its continents and mountains, with all the beings that it contains, friendly, hostile, or indifferent—be they as high-ranking as the heavens, as strong as thunder, as rich as the kings of nagas, as beautiful as the gods, as fascinating as rainbows—all is destined to destruction.

Whatever strongholds have been built, whatever wealth has been accumulated, whatever families have come together; everything will go. How absurd to do evil for their sake!

Chapter Two - Stanza 36:

Just like the experiences in a dream,
Anything I enjoy
Will become an object of memory.
Everything that's passed, I won't see again.

Shantideva gives the example of the objects of the five sense consciousnesses that he enjoyed the previous night in his dreams, together with whatever was done in their regard: enemies he defeated, friends he protected, the wealth, honours, and all the rest that he gained. He wakes in the morning to find he has nothing to show for it; everything is no more than a memory.

In just the same way, he says, everything done the day before, all distinctions and discriminations made concerning the five objects of sense—accepting some, rejecting others, subduing rivals, supporting friends.

Everything done in the name of business, lands, wealth, honour, renown, food, and clothes. Everything that was wanted and experienced—all is now no more than a memory. It all comes down to: "This I did, and this was done to me."

Everything that has passed and no longer exists will never be seen again; it can bring no active benefit or harm. It is pointless to engage in action because of it.

Let us end it here today and take a few minutes to experience some quietness before dedicating our session to the benefit of all.

