

Shantideva's Bodhicaryâvatâra

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Group Study with Venerable Lama Sangyay Tendzin

Session 72 - Saturday September 23, 2023

Chapter Eight: MEDITATIVE CONCENTRATION (Far-Reaching Mental Stability): 187 Slokas

REFUGE | MANDALA | REQUEST for TEACHINGS

Lama's Invocation of the Buddhas and assembly of lineage holders.

Short practice of Mental Quiescence - Generation of Bodhicitta

Good morning. Last session was ending with Stanza 27, which comes along a series of aspirations formulated by Shantideva in his exposé on the topic describing the qualities of remaining in solitude as a condition to practice concentration. Now we read Stanza 28:

Stanza 28:

**When shall I come to live without fears,
Having (just a few) small things, a (clay) begging bowl and the like,
Wearing clothes that no one would want,
And not even sheltering this body?**

When might we be able to live alone, with only a clay begging bowl and a few possessions of no value, dressed in cotton rags found on the rubbish heap and unwanted by anyone else i.e., without the need to hide either ourselves or our belongings for fear of thieves and predators, unafraid of being seen or harmed?

Stanza 29:

**When, having gone to a charnel ground,
Shall I come to compare,
With the piles of others' bones,
My body, having the nature to rot.**

When thinking about our state of mind, even if we're not in a place of death like a charnel ground, we should aspire to see our living bodies as no different than the corpses or skeletons we might encounter there. This is a way to remind ourselves that we, too, are not immune to decay and destruction.

When we see decaying, blue corpses, we should remember that they were once living, loved, and susceptible to illness and weather, just like our own bodies are now. Essentially, there's no difference between them and us in that regard.

The key takeaway is to realize that no matter how alive and cherished our bodies might feel today, they're fundamentally the same as the corpses we see. It's important to internalize this understanding to help us focus on breaking free from the cycle of life and death, known as samsara.

Stanza 30:

**This very body of mine
Will also become (putrid) like that,
And because of its stench,
Not even the jackals will slink nearby.**

It is crucial to contemplate and meditate on the inevitable fate of our physical bodies. As vivid and full of life as they appear now, the day will come when they perish and decompose.

During this process, the body will emit such a foul odour that even scavengers like jackals and wolves, who normally feast on all kinds of meat, will avoid it. No one will want to come close to it.

This is the unavoidable future that awaits our physical form, and this reality may arrive sooner than we anticipate.

Stanza 31:

**Though this body was born as a single object,
The flesh and bones that arose with it
Will fall apart and go their own ways.
What need to mention friends that are other (than it)?**

The form we currently inhabit, appearing so complete and cohesive -born from the womb of our mother- will eventually collapse. The tissues and bones that life has woven together will decompose at the time of our passing.

Understanding this, it becomes clear that in the realm of human connections, friendships and familial ties are also impermanent. All that is presently conjoined will ultimately diverge.

Stanza 32:

**A man is born alone, when taking birth,
And dies alone too, when undergoing death.
As no one else can take a share of this pain,
What can be done by encumbering friends?**

We come into this world alone and we leave it in the same way i.e., by ourselves. The cycle of birth and death is the root cause of all our suffering. This cycle is something that we alone created and must experience; even those closest to us can't take on that burden for us.

So, it's worth questioning the importance we give to relationships that may in fact hinder our spiritual growth. Whether it's our friends or family, if they're blocking our path to virtuous living or deeper understanding, perhaps their role in our lives needs to be reconsidered.

After all, these connections aren't necessary for our spiritual journey.

Stanza 33:

**Just as the way in which travellers on a road
Take up a place to lodge,
Similar is the way in which travellers on the road of compulsive existence,
Take up a rebirth as a place to lodge.**

Just as travellers on a lengthy voyage pause at various inns and rest stops, only to resume their journey, beings navigating the worldly realm—unaware of their origin and destiny—momentarily cling to the circumstance of their birth.

Those who currently find themselves in the human realm, become enamoured with their state, resisting the idea of moving on. Yet, inevitably, the Lord of Death approaches, and despite their unwillingness, they have no power to stay his hand as they are ushered into their next existence.

Stanza 34:

**So, let me retire to the forest,
Until four pallbearers
Haul that body out from there,
While all my worldly (relations) grieve.**

This stanza evokes At the time of death, as described in the King Sutra (*): both, relatives and friend, will exclaim, "Oh, my dear father! Oh, my dear mother!" Their eyes will brim with tears of grief. They will pull at their own hair in anguish as four individuals bear the body from the home to the final resting place.

(*) The King Sutra, or Rājāvāḍaka-sūtra states the following famous stanza:

“When the time has come and the king has to go, neither his friends nor his wealth follow!
Wherever from wherever to, do beings go, karma follows them like a shadow!”

Shantideva determines that until the time of his death arrives, he will retreat into the solitude of the forest, away from human interaction, to focus solely on cultivating virtuous conduct, as it is the only thing that will aid him when that moment comes.

Stanza 35:

**Let this body stay there in isolation, alone,
Making neither intimate friends nor conflicts.
If I’m already counted as if I were dead,
There’ll be no mourners when I actually die.**

In that secluded space, Shantideva plans to remain, "without forming attachments or grievances,". Since his family views him as if he were already deceased, they no longer hold any expectations concerning him. As a result, his passing will not bring sorrow or distress to anyone.

Stanza 36:

**As there’ll be no attendants (hovering) nearby,
Mourning and causing distress,
There’ll be no one to distract this (hermit)
From continuing mindfulness of Buddha and more.**

Additionally, by choosing a life of solitude, he ensures that no Dharma companions will be present to grieve his departure, sparing them emotional distress and himself the concern for their sorrow.

This isolation also guarantees that he will remain undistracted from contemplating the Buddha and the Dharma, as well as from executing the essential practices as he approaches the end of his life. As a result, he will transition peacefully, with a mind rooted in virtue.

As it is said in the sutra:

*“Since you live a good and blameless life,
And are grown used to virtuous deeds,
When death arrives, you will not suffer,
For it will be like fleeing from a burning house”.*

Stanza 37:

**So, let me live in solitude,
In lovely, delightful forests,
With little trouble, happiness, and well-being,
Quieting all distractions.**

The virtues of solitude are abundant. Shantideva contemplates that within the tranquil, radiant woods, domestic chores become inconsequential.

The obligation to appease the influential or safeguard the vulnerable vanishes. His mind is unburdened and his body at ease.

Indeed, solitude bestows its own unique gifts, primarily in the quieting of bodily, verbal, and mental distractions. In such an environment, he declares, he will find eternal solace in aloneness.

Stanza 38:

**Having cast off all other intentions,
And with my intent single-pointed,
I shall strive there for settling my mind in absorbed concentration,
And making it tamed.**

Forsaking all worldly desires and intentions i.e., whether they be of selfish gain, acquiring religious offerings, defeating adversaries, or safeguarding allies, Shantideva commits to the vigilant governance of his own mind as his singular focus.

He commits to master the intricate meditative practices of Zhinay and Lhagtong, known as Shamata and Vipassana:

- Through Shamata, he aims to bring his mind to a state of tranquil stability; while,
- With Vipassana, he seeks to cultivate discerning wisdom that tames the mind's restless nature.

As he commits to this, Shantideva admonishes giving up wandering thoughts. which is **the** aim of Zhinay meditation and as you may experience, not an easy one!

Such difficult topic must be taught in detail, discussing the many causes of failure. A wealth of teachings exist to guide us in letting go of distracting thoughts all of which, boil down to the three poisons of aversion, attachment and ignorance.

The Bodhicaryâvatâra serves as a comprehensive manual on this subject.

Within its chapters, each focuses on addressing specific mental states, for example:

- the chapter on patience provides a targeted solution for quelling anger,
- The current chapter, dedicated to meditative concentration, presents effective countermeasures for overcoming desire and attachment.
- the wisdom chapter offers insights to dispel ignorance.

To start with, Shantideva gives us a general outline in Stanza 39:

Stanza 39:

**For lustful desires give rise to disasters
In this world and in the next ones as well.
In this one, they bring about murder, imprisonment, and knifings,
And in the next, joyless realms and the like.**

In both this lifetime and any that may follow, the yearning for relationships, wealth, and other worldly things serves as the root cause of all our suffering. The pursuit of romantic interests or material success can lead to severe consequences—violence, imprisonment, or bodily harm.

While the pleasure may seem worthwhile in the moment, the true cost is often revealed in our future existence, where we may endure immeasurable suffering in the realms of hell, as well as the states of pretas and animals.

Remember, what may seem joyful today can exact a heavy price in the form of future pain.

We will stop here for today. Let us practice mental quiescence for a short while, before dedicating our merit for the benefit of all.

