

Shantideva's
Bodhicaryâvatâra

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Group Study with Venerable Lama Sangyay Tendzin
Session 73 - Saturday October 07, 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 39, giving a general explanation of the admonishment to "Giving up wandering thoughts". Starting with stanza 40, Shantideva engages in a detailed exposé on "Abandoning craving for a lover":

Stanza 40:

**Those bodies for which sake, you repeatedly begged.
Before male and female go-betweens,
And for which sake, you didn't shrink
From either negative behaviour or disgrace,**

"In the pursuit of romantic or sexual desire, one may resort to extreme measures, disregarding one's ethical or moral boundaries. It is such that one may employ various intermediaries and extend multiple invitations, heedless of the potentially damaging consequences such actions may have on one's integrity or reputation.

Such individuals may even be willing to sacrifice their moral commitments and social standing, ignoring the disdain such actions engender in both human society and the spiritual realm. Despite the severe risks, they remain obstinately undeterred, willing even to endure physical hardships like hunger and thirst."

Stanza 41:

**For which you threw yourself even in danger
And even spent all your wealth,
And embracing which,
You experienced the utmost pleasure of sexual release.**

Such individuals willingly take perilous chances, making themselves vulnerable to physical harm, and thus accruing suffering in this life and the lives to come. There's a real risk of losing their life and facing the torment of hellish realms.

It goes without saying that none of the resources they may have greedily amassed—be it food, clothing, possessions, or wealth, nor the offerings from devotees or those given on behalf of the departed -will be devoted to spiritual or charitable endeavours, such as creating sacred art or supporting the Three Jewels.

Rather than even using these resources for their own basic needs, they waste them all to lavish gifts upon their partner, all for the transient pleasure of their sexual relationship.

Stanza 42:

**They were nothing but skeletons,
Independent, and never yours!
Why not push on, instead, to nirvanic release,
Which you can fully embrace to your heart's content?**

If one scrutinizes the object of physical desire, it becomes evident that it is merely a composite of three hundred and sixty bones. (*) It is neither inherently pleasurable nor desirable. Why then is it the focus of so much craving?

(*) The idea of 360 bones found in the commentary of Kunzang Palden is sometimes encountered in traditional texts or teachings, often for symbolic or metaphorical purposes rather than as a factual anatomical count.

The concept of a "body" is merely a label placed upon an assembly of parts; it lacks independent existence. Likewise, there's no self that truly exists in isolation from these parts.

Another perspective could be that since the craved partner body is not one's own, it's not under one's control. It belongs to another, so why should one be ensnared by such a craving? Would it not be wiser to pursue a state beyond suffering?

It's as if a decision lies before us: if one aspires to transcend suffering, the desire for a lover must be relinquished. Such desires hinder the threefold path of training and make the attainment of nirvana elusive. The foundation for all virtuous qualities is a disciplined life, and it is only through this discipline that one can let go of external and internal cravings.

Failing to do so impedes the development of focused tranquillity, or Shamata, and without that stability, the penetrating insight of Vipassana will remain out of reach. Without the harmonious blend of Shamata and Vipassana, it becomes impossible to fully overcome even the subtlest afflictions, thereby blocking the pathway beyond suffering.

Following this admonishment and to support its acceptance, Shantideva engages an extensive "Reflection on the unclean nature of the human body". This will be taking us from Stanza 43 up to stanza 70.

Stanza 43:

**That face, which you lifted first with effort, and drew near,
Although it was bashfully looking down,
And whether previously seen or not seen,
Was covered with a veil,**

N.B.: Today's societal landscape offers a diverse range of relationships that go beyond traditional male-female dynamics. It must be understood that the following reflection goes and rests on the habits and customs of laypeople at the time of Shantideva in India. Bypassing the tendency to 'stick on the words', the same reasoning can be applied to today's various kinds of relationships.

Wishing to gaze upon the face of his bride for the first time, a man would go to great lengths to lift her lowered, modest visage. That face, always veiled as tradition dictates, has been a subject of deep yearning.

Stanza 44:

**That face, which emotionally disturbed you so,
Is now unveiled by the vultures,
And can be directly seen.
Why do you run away now?**

Yet, as Shantideva reflects, this very face that once fuelled the lover's desire now lies exposed in the charnel ground, bereft of any veils, having been picked clean by vultures. Shantideva wonders aloud, "Why does the lover now flee in horror upon seeing her?"

Stanza 45:

**That face which you protected before
From the leers of others' eyes,
Why aren't you protecting it now, jealous miser,
While it's being devoured by them?**

Shantideva goes on to say that the woman, once zealously guarded by her possessive lover to keep her away from other men, now lies unprotected as food for scavengers in the graveyard. If he won't protect her even now, why was he so possessive of her in the first place?

Stanza 46:

**Seeing this pile of meat
Being gulped down by vultures and the rest,
Tell me, is the food of others something to be offered
With garlands of flowers, jewellery, and sandalwood scent?**

Shantideva urges us to contemplate the human body, an object that may be lavishly adorned and considered beautiful but is ultimately destined to be the nourishment of scavengers. Adorned with jewellery, scented with sandalwood and decorated with flowers, it is, in reality, nothing more than a future feast for carrion-eaters. Shantideva queries, "Why do we engage in such illogical acts?" The incongruity of it all baffles him.

Stanza 47:

**If you experience fright from seeing even a skeleton,
Though it lacks any movement,
Why wasn't there horror when it was set into motion
By some intent, like a zombie.**

For the lover should look again—at the dreadful skull and bones in the charnel ground, inert and dead. What is he so scared of? Why was he not afraid of them when they were walking around, propelled by the ghostly presence of the breath and the afflictive emotions of the mind, like a risen corpse? He ought to have been more afraid than lustful!

Stanza 48:

**You lusted after it, even when it was covered,
Why don't you lust for it now, when uncovered from its skin?
If you have no use for it now,
Why did you sexually embrace it when covered?**

He loved her body once, when it was clothed and adorned. Why does he not want it now that it is naked and thrown in the charnel ground? Logically, he ought to want and desire it. If he were to reply that he does not desire this naked corpse because it is unclean, why did he embrace it when it was all bedecked and covered? For the fact is that it was as unclean then as it is now.

Stanza 49:

**Its excrement and saliva
Arise from one and the same food.
So why, out of the two, do you take no delight in the excrement.
And yet delight in a taste of saliva?**

What if he were to say that he took delight in the saliva of his mistress? In truth, her excrement and her saliva come from a single source. Both derive from her food. Why then does the ignorant and lustful lover not enjoy her excrement, finding it disgusting, while at the same time he delights to taste her saliva as though it were a honeyed nectar?

Stanza 50:

**Finding no sexual pleasure in pillows,
Filled with cotton and soft to the touch,
After all "They don't exude a foul stench,"
Lustful people are bewildered about excrement.**

Perhaps he says that it is the softness of her touch that pleases him. Softness of touch, however, is also supplied by cotton wool, yet the lover has no desire for it and takes no delight in pleasant pillows, telling himself that cotton wool derives from something unclean. But the lustful lover is all mixed up. He fails to recognize the uncleanness of his mistress's body for what it is and claims it does not emit an evil stench.

Stanza 51:

**Lustful, gross, bewildered people,
Thinking, "It's impossible to make love
To cotton, soft to the touch,"
Become furious with it instead.**

Those ensnared by lust are often bewildered, focused solely on their partners who are intrinsically impure. They unjustly criticize even the softest cotton pillows, simply because they cannot engage in intimate acts with them. Their attachment is not to the gentleness of touch, but rather to the inherent impurity.

Stanza 52:

**If you have no attachment for what is foul,
Why do you sexually embrace another (body):
A cage work of bones, bound together with sinews,
And plastered over with a mud of flesh?**

Should they claim they are not drawn to impurity, then why do they affectionately hold a human form, essentially a skeletal structure held together by tendons and enveloped in flesh?

Stanza 53:

**You yourself contain plenty of excrement,
So manage by yourself, steadfastly with that.
Glutton for excrement,
You long for yet another bag of excrement?**

One's own body is a reservoir of unclean elements, such as saliva, mucus, waste, and urine, and yet one constantly immerses oneself in it. Still, there's an insatiable desire for another vessel of the same impurities, the body of a loved one, also filled with thirty-six forms of uncleanness. Why would one find this appealing? It's illogical.

Stanza 54:

**Thinking, "But it's the flesh I delight in,"
You long to touch and look at it.
But why have you no desire for the flesh
Here, in its natural state, devoid of a mind?**

Some may argue that they aren't attracted to mere fabric but rather to the touch and sight of their partners' skin and flesh. To this, Shantideva counters: why then do they not take pleasure in touching the flesh of their beloved's lifeless body, abandoned in its natural state in the burial grounds?

This is enough for today. Let us practice mental quiescence for a short while, before dedicating our merit for the benefit of all.

