

Shantideva's Bodhicaryâvatâra

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Group Study with Venerable Lama Sangyay Tendzin

Session 74 - Saturday October 14, 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 ended by the study of the Stanza 54, which pertains to a lengthy exposé by Shantideva on “Abandoning craving for a lover”:

Stanza 55:

**And whatever mind you might desire,
Cannot be touched or looked at,
And whatever can, hasn't a consciousness.
So, it's no use! Why do you sexually embrace it?**

Shantideva argues that while lovers may claim their affection is rooted in the mental or spiritual qualities of their partners, the physical aspects of their relationship contradict this notion.

Lovers cannot physically interact with the minds they claim to cherish; instead, they engage in physical intimacy with bodies, which are separate from the minds they profess to love. This inconsistency suggests a fundamental confusion in their understanding of love and desire.

In this manner, Shantideva challenges the commonly held belief that love is primarily a mental or spiritual connection, by highlighting the incongruence between what lovers say they desire and what their actions reveal.

Stanza 56:

**Though it's no great surprise that you don't understand
That another's body, by nature, is something full of excrement;
But that you don't understand that your very own
Is, by nature, something full of excrement – that's really shocking!**

Not recognizing the impure aspects of a lover's body, which may be temporarily hidden, is perhaps understandable. However, the inability to acknowledge the evident uncleanliness of one's own body is both perplexing and absurd. It reflects a lack of wisdom and is, in fact, quite unbelievable.

Stanza 57:

**Having rejected the tender lotus, born from the muck
And opened by the rays of the unclouded sun,
What delight is there in a cage work of bones, full of faeces,
For a mind obsessed with excrement.**

While some may declare their affection based on the allure of their partner's skin, one might question why they do not instead marvel at the vibrant hues and elegance of a newly blossomed lotus under a clear sky.

Being captivated by mere corporeal form, which is fundamentally impure, seems inconsistent with reason.

Stanza 58:

**If you don't wish to touch soil and places
That are smeared with excrement,
How is it that you wish to touch the body,
Out of which it was excreted?**

Shantideva methodically illustrates that the body of a desired partner inherently serves as both a cause and an effect of impurities.

In instances where objects like clothing or surfaces are contaminated with unclean substances such as excrement or urine, there is a natural aversion to making contact. Yet, it is the body of the beloved that produces such impurities. Thus, the question arises: why should one still yearn to touch it?

The statement touches on a complex interaction between physical and emotional realities, examining the contradiction between the natural aversion to impurities and the desire to be close to a loved one.

From a psychological perspective, the natural aversion to substances like excrement or urine is often rooted in an evolutionary instinct for hygiene and disease avoidance. On the other hand, the desire to touch or be near a loved one is motivated by emotional bonds, which often override such instinctual aversions.

From a Buddhist perspective, this can be an opportunity to explore the concept of attachment versus non-attachment. Attachment to the physical form can lead to suffering, due to its impermanent and ever-changing nature.

Recognizing this, one might cultivate a form of love or compassion that is less dependent on physical factors and more aligned with a deeper, spiritual understanding of connection such as 'Karuna and Metta'.

Therefore, the question serves as an entry point to deeper inquiries about the nature of attachment, love, and the complexities of human emotion versus instinct.

Stanza 59:

**If you have no attachment for what is foul,
Why do you sexually embrace another body:
The seed of which grew from a field full of excrement
And was nourished by it.**

The body of the cherished partner is likewise a product of impurities. While lovers may believe they hold no affection for, nor wish to engage with, substances considered foul, such as excrement and urine, they must confront the reality that their partners' bodies originated from an impure source—namely, their mother's womb.

The contemplations presented here align with philosophical and spiritual inquiries that delve into the nature of attachment, desire, and perception. Their purpose is to invite us to critically examine the contradictions or inconsistencies in how we perceive and interact with the world and our loved ones.

It's important to note that the goal is not necessarily to inspire aversion or disdain but rather to encourage a nuanced understanding of desire and attachment. This can be a crucial step toward cultivating mindfulness and discernment, key aspects of spiritual development.

Stanza 60:

**Is it because of its tininess that you don't long,
For a foul maggot born from excrement?
You desire, in fact, a body, also born from excrement,
Since by nature, it's full of a lot of excrement!**

Inherent in their essence, they serve as both the origin and consequence of contamination. As observed by Shantideva, individuals exhibit no desire towards the minuscule, malodorous organisms found in waste. What then prompts them to yearn for a human body, which itself is a result of manifold unclean elements such as tissue, blood, and bodily waste?

Stanza 61:

**Not only do you not disparage,
The excremental nature of yourself,
You glutton for excrement,
You long for other bags of excrement too!**

Such attachment is misguided. Lovers not only lack revulsion towards their own physical impurities, but they also desire more of the same from others. Their bodies, essentially vessels of unclean substances, crave even more of these elements from the bodies of their partners. This is highly disgraceful.

Stanza 62:

**Whether it's refreshing chews with camphor and the like,
Or cooked rice with vegetable curries,
Once put in the mouth and then spat out or vomited,
Even the ground becomes filthy and foul.**

An entity that contaminates what is pure is, by that logic, impure itself. When substances considered clean and agreeable, such as camphor, saffron, sugarcane, rice, and fragrant herbs, are taken into the mouth and then expelled, they tarnish an otherwise clean surface. How much more, then, does the human body, which turns these clean elements into impurities?

This statement highlights the concept of impurity through the act of defilement, drawing attention to the transformative nature of the human body in converting pure substances into impure forms. It uses the example of universally accepted pure substances, like camphor and saffron, to emphasize that if even these can become impure through human interaction, the inherent impurity of the human body should be indisputable.

This observation serves as a reflection on the nature of existence, purity, and the role the human body plays in the cycle of life and death. It encourages a deeper examination of one's attachments to the physical world and may serve as a reminder to seek spiritual purity, aligning with the teachings on the elimination of attachments and the realization of the true nature of things.

Stanza 63:

**If you still have doubts about its being, like this,
In the nature of excrement, though it's so obvious,
Look at the ghastly foul bodies of others,
Thrown away in the charnel ground.**

Shantideva tells us that if still we doubt the filthiness of the body, in both its aspects of cause and effect, though it is very plain for all to see, we should go to the charnel grounds and observe the corpses abandoned there, rotting, devoured by worms; a most fetid and disgusting experience.

Stanza 64:

**When the skin is torn open,
Great horror comes up from it.
Knowing just that, how can delight,
Come up any more from that very same thing?**

If we were to peel away the skin from the corpses abandoned there, seeing the revolting, stinking blood, intestines, excremental discharges, and so on, we would feel great horror and repulsion. We are perfectly aware of this. Yet how is it that we are still not apprehensive of this body? How can we still crave and desire it without ever being satisfied?

As we examine closely the contradiction between the body's unattractive realities and the clinging or craving that often still occurs, the divergence between intellectual understanding and emotional or instinctual reaction can be attributed to deep-rooted kleshas.

Kleshas or conflicting emotions are mental states that cloud the mind and manifest in unwholesome actions. Specifically, the kleshas of raga (attachment) and avidya (ignorance) prevent us from internalizing the logical conclusions drawn from such reflections.

Meditation on the unattractive nature of the body can be instrumental in filling the gap between intellectual understanding and actual experience.

Through consistent practice, one can gradually abandon the delusive tendency to see the body as inherently desirable or permanent. This helps loosening the bonds of attachment and progress toward enlightenment.

Stanza 65:

**And that smell sloshed on the body
Is from sandalwood and such things, not from the other person.
So why are you attracted to someone else,
By the smell of something other?**

This statement advances that a man may profess to be enamoured by the alluring fragrance emanating from his partner's body. However, upon closer inspection, the intoxicating aroma that he finds so compelling is not a natural quality of her body. Rather, it is the result of external agents like sandalwood or musk with which she has adorned herself.

Therefore, attributing his affection to her body's innate scent would be a misrepresentation, as the scent that captivates him is extraneous to her physical self.

This commentary highlights the idea that our attractions and desires are often influenced by external factors or conditions, and therefore may not be as authentic or innate as we initially believe. It reminds to examine the true source of our attachments.

Stanza 66:

**If, because of its naturally foul smell,
There's no attraction to it, isn't that fortunate?
Why do people in this world, who relish what's useless,
Slosh it with sweet smelling things?**

If one is attached only to a scent, it would surely make more sense to refrain from longing for a lover's body, which, left to itself, gives off unpleasant odours. Yet worldly people lust for what is not to the purpose. What point is there in applying the sweet perfume of sandalwood to an impure body?

Stanza 67:

**Well then, if what has the sweet smell is sandalwood,
What comes from the body in this case?
So why are you attracted to someone else
By the smell of something other?**

For given that the sweet fragrance derives from the sandal with which the body is anointed, what perfume can possibly arise from a partner's body, which of itself is unclean and malodorous? How is it that the smell of something extraneous excites longing for something that is impure and ill-smelling—a lover's body?

Stanza 68:

**If the natural state of the body is totally horrific –
Naked, coated with a tarnish of grime,
Its hair and nails long,
Its teeth yellow and stained –**

For if a body is not at all washed and kept clean; if it is left untended, with lanky hair; long, overgrown nails; dirty, stained teeth that reek with decomposing sediment—what a disgusting horror it is! This naked body is as frightful as a ghost!

Stanza 69:

**Why spruce it up with so much hard work,
Like a weapon for inflicting self-harm?
Oh dear, this world is truly bustling with madmen
Working so hard deluding themselves!**

Moreover, why go to such excessive trouble to clean and groom this body, the object of our attachment? It is like cleaning and polishing the very weapon with which, we are to be wounded. Clinging in ignorance to their bodies—identifying something that is without a self as “I” and “mine” and taking as pure something that is impure—people lavish care upon themselves, bathing, and grooming.

As they drink down the intoxicating waters of desire, their minds are driven wild. The entire surface of the earth is engulfed in madness. Beings are indeed pitiful. The earth is filled with those who strive exclusively for their own ends, taking care of those they love, combating those they hate, doing the utmost to secure wealth and renown.

When the Bodhisattvas behold them, high and powerful or just ordinary people, behaving as though they were completely insane, their hearts are filled with sorrow, and they weep with compassion.

Stanza 70:

**Having seen merely a few skeletons,
You were so turned off in the charnel ground.
Yet you find sexual pleasure in charnel-ground cities
Crowded with moving skeletons?**

We are reluctant to visit and look at the charnel grounds where there is nothing but human corpses and skeletons. We feel fear and revulsion. Why then do we take so much pleasure in the cities of the living dead, inhabited by skeletons that move, animated by the mind and breath?

We will stop here today. The next topic presented by Shantideva is a reflection on the many injuries that result from attachment.

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

