

Shantideva's
Bodhicaryâvatâra

བྱང་ཆུབ་སེམས་པའི་རྒྱུད་པ་ལ་འཇུག་པ།
Group Study with Venerable Lama Sangyay Tendzin

Session 76 - Saturday October 28, 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

I wish everyone an auspicious welcome to this 76th session of our group study on Bodhicharyâvatâra. Having investigated the many impediments and setbacks resulting from attachment, Shantideva now debates the excellence of remaining in solitude.

Stanza 85:

**Recoiling from desires in this way,
I shall enhance my delight in solitude.
In peaceful forests,
Devoid of strife and emotional disturbance,**

Shantideva advises that, disheartened by our desire for material wealth and sensual gratification—elements more detrimental than venom—we should find solace in the virtues of solitude. In such isolated environments, the struggles for companionship and material goods, along with the vexations of attachment and aversion, naturally dissolve. It is within these tranquil and vacant spaces that distractions effortlessly cease.

Stanza 86:

**Amongst (beautiful) boulders,
Huge as palaces, cooled by the sandalwood rays of the moon,
Roam the fortunate ones, fanned by the silent, gentle, forest breezes,
Reflecting on the aims of benefiting others.**

In the tranquil sanctity of lush forests, Bodhisattvas, blessed with the exalted teachings of the Dharma, reside in expansive, soothing havens made of polished, monumental stone, bathed in the cooling light of the moon—more rejuvenating than even the finest sandalwood balm.

These spiritual practitioners find themselves in a state far superior to that of opulent kings in their fragrant sandalwood palaces, ventilated by jewelled fans. Free from the distractions of daytime crowds or nocturnal disturbances, they exist in peaceful solitude, carried by the mild, refreshing breezes of the woodland.

While a king may traverse his domain with concerns for its betterment, Bodhisattvas walk purposefully, their minds fixed solely on the betterment of countless sentient beings.

Stanza 87:

**Staying anywhere, for as long as desired
In an empty shelter, at the foot of a tree, or in caves
Those rid of the strain of safeguarding possessions
Live relaxed, without any cares,**

Hence, according to Shantideva, let us aspire to dwell in tranquil places, under the shelter of magnificent trees, or in unclaimed abodes for extended periods—be it months or years. May we relinquish the burdens associated with the ownership of homes and material possessions.

May our existence be characterized by a liberating lack of constraints, free from the compulsion to ingratiate ourselves with individuals of authority or to shield those of lesser status, unbound by either the quest for gain or the apprehension of misfortune.

Stanza 88:

**Acting according to their own intent,
Without attachments, not bound by anyone,
Savouring the joy of contentment,
Difficult to find for even powerful rulers.**

The freedom to act without attachments brings unparalleled contentment, a wealth even Indra would envy. Contentment surpasses all other forms of wealth, as affirmed in the Suhrillekha: "Be content, for then you are truly rich."

The emphasis on solitude's value in fostering meditative concentration is deliberate. Initially, it inspires us to seek isolation; later, it sustains us when loneliness or lack of resources make us falter. This recurring theme serves to fortify our commitment to solitude, extolled by Buddhas and Bodhisattvas alike.

Shantideva now, subsequently focuses on Meditative Concentration on Bodhicitta, starting with a brief connection to the earlier discussion on solitude before diving into detailed guidance on the subject.

Stanza 89:

**Having considered, with aspects such as these and more,
The benefits of dissociating myself,
And thus, fully quieting my rambling thoughts,
I shall meditate on Bodhicitta.**

Shantideva emphasizes the importance of repeated reflection on the benefits of undistracted focus, inner stillness, and altruism. He advocates for the solitude of body, speech, and mind as paths to enduring happiness. By quelling our desires and attachments, we pave the way for meditation on bodhicitta.

Essentially, mastering the preparatory stage of the first samadhi leads to the manifestation of samadhi itself. This mastery comes from shedding attachments and adopting detachment, enabling wholesome action.

Samadhi is not mental emptiness but full control over the mind. When active, it engages virtuously; when still, it remains unshakeable.

Stanza 90:

**First, I shall meditate strongly on
The equality of myself and others in this way:
As everyone's a fellow being, having happiness and pain,
Others are to be cared for by me in the same way as I am.**

In the practice of relative Bodhicitta, Shantideva identifies two focal points:

- 1) meditating on the equality of self and others, and
- 2) the exchange of self and others.

The former serves as a prerequisite for the latter; without it, true altruism is unattainable.

The fundamental truth is that all beings, us included, share a common goal: the pursuit of happiness and the avoidance of suffering. This commonality should drive us to cultivate an intent to safeguard others as we would ourselves.

The notions of "I" and "other" lack ultimate grounding; they are mere mental constructs. When one realizes the non-existence of the "I," the concept of the "other" also dissolves, as it is contingent upon the "I."

In recognizing this egolessness, the separation between self and other vanishes, leading to an altruistic outlook where the interests of both become inseparable.

Understanding this pivotal point of egolessness is challenging but crucial. It lays the groundwork for transcending the illusory duality between self and other, leading to a unified concern for the well-being of all.

Stanza 91:

**Just as, despite its many parts, with divisions into hands and so on,
The body's to be cared for as a whole;
Similarly, despite the differences among wandering beings,
Yet regarding happiness and pain, we are all equal in wishing to be happy, and (thus form) a whole.**

Reflecting on the concept of equality involves recognizing the interconnectedness of all beings. Just as you regard your hands, feet, and internal organs as part of one body and protect it as such, so should you view all sentient beings across various realms.

Like you, they also seek happiness and wish to avoid suffering. By identifying them as extensions of your own "I," you can cultivate compassion toward them, just as you do for your own well-being.

Consider this: if asked how many bodies you have, you would likely respond that you have only one, which you care for as a single entity. However, the term "body" merely serves as a label for an assembly of different components. There is no fundamental reason why you designate your assembly of components as "I" and exclude others from this label.

Therefore, it is intellectually valid to extend the label of "I" to include all sentient beings. As you mentally align yourself with this broader sense of "I," you'll naturally begin to care for others in the same way you care for yourself. This shift in perspective could be transformative, fostering a greater sense of universal compassion.

Stanza 92:

**Although my own pain
Doesn't hurt the bodies of others,
Yet being, like that, the pain of a "me,"
It's unbearable, because of clinging to a "me."**

How can one develop such an outlook, especially when the discomfort I experience is not felt by others, and vice versa? A reading of this sloka suggests that although my suffering does not physically impact others, it remains a part of my sense of self, becoming intolerable to me due to my attachment to it as my own experience.

Stanza 93:

**Likewise, though the pain of others
Doesn't befall me,
Yet being, like that, the pain of a "me,"
It's also difficult to bear, because of clinging to a "me."**

In his commentary, Kunzang Palden emphasizes the distinct natures of the material body and the immaterial mind, stating that pain is a mental construct, influenced by how deeply the mind identifies with its bodily support.

However, this attachment is not irreversible; through skilful practice, the mind can detach from bodily suffering. Through skilful practice, the mind can detach from bodily suffering. This capacity for detachment influences how Bodhisattvas empathize with others' sufferings.

This feeling of attachment can be retrained. Once the mind shifts its focus from self-centred suffering to empathic understanding, the experience of suffering transforms. Thus, mental training can lead not only to personal detachment from physical pain but also to a natural and imperative urge to alleviate others' sufferings.

Stanza 94:

**Thus, the pain of others is something to be eliminated by me,
Because of its (nature as) pain, like the pain of a “me”;
And others are beings to be helped by me,
Because of their (natures as) limited beings, like the body of a “me.”**

For Shantideva, the commitment to alleviate the suffering of others stems not from a moral obligation but from logical reasoning. His objective is to eradicate those forms of suffering that offer no ultimate advantage to individuals. He argues that just as one naturally seeks to relieve personal discomforts like hunger or thirst, so too should one aim to dispel the discomforts of others.

Similarly, Shantideva emphasizes the importance of enhancing the well-being of others simply because they are sentient beings. He posits that this should be done in the same manner as one would attend to one's own physical comfort.

Stanza 95:

**When happiness is something equally liked,
Both by myself and others,
What's so special about me
That I strive after happiness for myself alone?**

Since there is not the slightest difference between us and others in wanting happiness. Why could we possibly not work for the happiness of others? It does not make sense that we should work only in our own interest.

Stanza 96:

**And when suffering is something equally disliked,
Both by myself and others,
What's so special about me
That I take care of myself and not others?**

Similarly, there is no difference between us and others in that no one wants to experience suffering. Therefore, what reason do we have to fail protecting others from suffering? It does not make sense that we should strive exclusively to protect ourselves.

Stanza 97:

**If it's because their suffering doesn't harm me
That I don't safeguard them,
Why safeguard me against future life suffering,
If it doesn't harm me now?**

Should one argue, "While my own suffering indeed affects me, the suffering of others does not inflict pain upon me at this moment; thus, there is no need for me to guard myself against it," this perspective merits examination.

Even imminent sufferings, whether they be severe afflictions in future lives or minor discomforts in the days to come, are not causing us harm at this very moment. If future adversities are not distressing us presently, then the argument to solely protect oneself appears inconsistent.

Stanza 98:

**That notion is distorted that thinks,
“But I’m the one who’ll experience it,”
For, like this, it’s someone else who has died
And someone else who takes birth.**

It is crucial to understand that while there are causal connections between successive lives, there is no permanence, nor discontinuity. The Buddhist view avoids both extremes of eternal existence and nihilistic non-existence.

This nuanced understanding lies within the exclusive pure view of an omniscient mind and is to be accepted through reliance on the teachings of the Buddha.

We will stop here for today. I invite you to practice mental quiescence for a short while, before dedicating the merit of this session to the benefit of all.

