

Shantideva's
Bodhicaryâvatâra

བྱང་ཆུབ་སེམས་པའི་སློབ་པ་ལ་འཇུག་པ།

Group Study with Venerable Lama Sangyay Tendzin

Session 77 - Saturday November 4, 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 as we enter this 77th session of our group study on Bodhicharyâvatâra. The topic we are dwelling on deals with the importance of applying meditative concentration in the practice of Bodhicitta.

Stanza 99:

**If whatever suffering anyone has
Must be taken care of by that one himself,
Then since the foot's suffering is not the hand's,
Why is that to be taken care of by it?**

One could argue that individuals undergoing hardship should bear the responsibility for their own well-being, instead of depending on others for protection. This standpoint likens the interconnectedness of human suffering to a hand that remains indifferent to the foot's pain when injured by a thorn. According to this view, the hand may not find it necessary to protect the foot. However, such a viewpoint appears to lack logical coherence.

Stanza 100:

**If it's the case that ignoring it would be illogical
And so here it's undertaken from a sense of a whole self.
Well then, surely what's illogical regarding the whole formed by myself and others
Is something to be dismissed, as much as I can.**

The opposing view maintains that these acts of protection may lack logical grounding. However, due to human attachment to self, individuals naturally tend to ensure the well-being of their future and support each other within their physical being.

In response, Shantideva emphasizes the necessity to let go of the excessive attachment to the concepts of "self" and "other," or to suffering itself, as it ultimately stems from an illusion.

Stanza 101:

**What are called a "continuum" and a "group," such as a rosary, an army, and the like,
Are not truly a findable whole.
And so, since a possessor of suffering doesn't exist,
Whose responsibility is it as "mine"?**

Again, the opposition suggests that while past and future lives may not be a single entity, they form a continuous sequence. Despite the differentiation between the hand and the foot, they represent a unified whole, fostering mutual protection.

Shantideva disagrees, asserting that the perceived continuous sequence or unified whole is illusory. A continuous sequence is a culmination of various moments, similar to beads on a necklace, while a composite is merely a fusion, like a group termed an "army."

This approach effectively establishes the concept of personal No-Self, revealing that the self, outside its perceived singularity and permanence, is intertwined with an illusion of continuity and aggregation.

Thus, without inherent reality, there exists no distinct "experiencer" of suffering, no personal self to claim ownership of pain. Consequently, no one can truly possess such suffering.

Stanza 102:

In their being without an owner,

All sufferings lack a distinction:

So it's simply because they're suffering that they're to be averted.

Why are there fixed limitations made here?

If there isn't a subject, no "experiencer" of the felt suffering, then distinguishing between "self" and "others" becomes impossible. Absent the existence of either, no contrast can be drawn between them. With neither having a basis for differentiation, the distinction between our pain and that of others dissolves.

Consequently, it becomes irrational to shield ourselves from suffering while neglecting to shield others from it. In light of this, it becomes evident that, since suffering is something to be eradicated, the suffering of others must also be alleviated, as pain is pain, regardless of the individual experiencing it.

What justification is there for eliminating only our suffering and not that of others? It would be a grave fallacy to believe such a distinction exists.

Stanza 103:

"But why is the suffering of everyone to be averted?"

Well, it's indisputable:

If anyone is to be averted, then everyone's to be averted;

If not, that applies to me as well, just like to every other limited being.

Some individuals may argue that if there is no self to perceive or endure pain, then suffering inherently harms no one. In such a scenario, why should one alleviate the suffering of others? What exactly should be eliminated, and who is there to eliminate it? There appears to be nothing requiring eradication.

However, this line of reasoning is not entirely valid. While this may hold true at the ultimate level, at the relative level, we do experience suffering as something that should be eliminated. Consequently, the suffering of others should also be alleviated. Conversely, if the suffering of others is deemed unremovable, it logically follows that our own suffering should remain intact as well. To remove it would lead to logical inconsistency.

Next, in Stanzas 104 to 106, Shantideva refutes those arguments opposing the equalization of self and other.

Stanza 104:

"But with compassion, there's much suffering.

So, why develop it with such effort?"

Well, having thought about the sufferings of wandering beings,

How could the suffering of compassion be much?

One might suggest that contemplating the sufferings of others often evokes a profound and almost overwhelming sense of compassion within us. However, considering the aim to eliminate all forms of sorrow, one might question the necessity of invoking the distress of compassion, whether within oneself or in others.

In response to this, one may argue that our focus should primarily be on the contemplation of the anguish experienced by beings in hell. After all, how could the "sting of our compassion" be deemed intense when juxtaposed with the excruciating agony endured by those in such realms?

Stanza 105:

**If the suffering of many disappears
Through the suffering of one,
That suffering would be something that someone with loving compassion
Would bring on, for the sake of himself and others.**

Despite the potential discomfort one might feel from being compassionate, this can be equated to a required injury sustained for the sake of curing an ailment. If mitigating the wide array of sorrows faced by others hinges on the unique suffering experienced by a person of compassion, then those who embody kindness and love must assuredly nurture such emotional pain within themselves as well as within their circle of fellow practitioners.

Stanza 106:

**Thus Supushpa-chandra(*),
Though knowing the punishment that he would receive from the king,
Didn't avoid the suffering for himself
In order to dispel the sufferings of many.**

(*) *Supushpachandra* is a bodhisattva who was ordered by royal ordinance to abstain from teaching the Buddha dharma. Yet, his compassion dictated him to ignore the law for the benefit of beings. He was consequently executed by King Shuradatta.

The necessity of nurturing the sorrow of compassion is illustrated through the tale of the Bodhisattva Supushpachandra in the Samadhiraja Sutra. Despite his clairvoyant knowledge of the impending threat on his life by King Viradatta, he fearlessly embraced the challenge.

His altruistic actions, including fasting for seven days, teaching the Dharma, and generating immense spiritual merit, led to the upliftment of numerous beings. Even after his tragic demise at the hands of the king, his story stands as a testament to the transformative power of selfless compassion.

A account of his story can be found in the Samadhiraja Sutra. (**)

(**) By now, the *Samadhiraja Sutra* has been quoted a few times in our group study. Thus, I feel appropriate to dwell on it briefly. In Tibetan, it stands for: "ལགས་པ་ཅེས་ཐམས་ཅད་ཀྱི་རང་ཞིན་མཉམ་པ་ཉིད་རྣམ་པར་སྤྱོད་པའི་འཛིན་གྱི་རྒྱལ་པོ་ཞེས་བྱ་བ་ཐེག་པ་ཆེན་པོའི་མངོན་པོ།", which is the translation of its Sanskrit title: "*Ārya-sarvadharmasvabhāvasamatā-vipañcita-samādhirāja-nāma-mahāyānasūtra*". This title can be rendered in English as: "*The Noble Mahāyāna Sūtra "The King of Samādhis, the Revealed Equality of the Nature of All Phenomena"*"

The *Samadhiraja Sutra* was given at the Vulture Peak near Rajghir, in response to a request presented to Lord Buddha Shakyamuni by the bodhisattva Candraprabha, asking how to acquire certain important qualities of the Buddhas. The Buddha replies that there is "one single dharma" which leads to these virtues, describing the samadhi called "*The elaboration of the sameness in their essence, of all phenomena*" through the following short statement: "*His mind is placid towards all beings, his mind is beneficial, his mind is sympathetic, his mind is not inclined to retaliation, his mind is not vexatious.*" The sutra lists more than 300 descriptions of this samadhi, such as: "restraint of body, speech and mind", "purity of actions", "going completely beyond supports", "comprehension of the aggregates", "indifference towards the bases of consciousness", "withdrawal from the sense-fields", "abandonment of craving," "direct realization of non-arising," "friendliness," "sweetness," good conduct, lack of aversion and attachment, knowledge of the Truths, and so on.

Next, Shantideva explains the benefits of the practice of equalising self and others.

Stanza 107:

**Those with mental continuums accustomed like this,
And who hold equally dear quelling the sufferings of others,
Plunge themselves into even a joyless realm of unrelenting pain
Like a swan into a lotus pond.**

According to Shantideva, individuals accustomed to perceiving the equality of self and others, finding joy in alleviating the suffering of others, will willingly journey even to the Hell of Unrelenting Pain. They do so with the same blissful enthusiasm as swans gracefully descending upon a charming lake adorned with lotuses.

Stanza 108:

And then, as limited beings are liberated, they have oceans of joy:

These are the ones who've gained real fulfilment.

Wouldn't that be sufficient?

What is there with the wish for (insipid) liberation?

Some contend that those of the Sravaka lineage are exempt from the necessity to venture into the hell realms, as their diligent pursuit of liberation yields rapid fulfilment and an overwhelming joy that soothes all anguish.

Shantideva, in a somewhat sardonic tone, questions whether the boundless delight derived from the emancipation of all sentient beings isn't sufficient. Why should one aspire solely for personal liberation? What purpose does such self-centred yearning serve? What satisfaction can be found in such a tedious felicity?

All interpretations of the text emphasize that liberation devoid of altruism holds little value. As conveyed in the Shikshasamucchaya, "Why should I strive for such insipid liberation?"

Stanza 109:

Thus, even though working for the benefit of others,

There's no conceit; there's no amazement.

There's no hoping for a ripening result for oneself,

When it's with an appetite exclusively for what benefits others.

Moreover, the noble endeavour of bestowing benefits upon others without any trace of self-centeredness should not serve as a source of pride or self-adulation. These selfless endeavours, as Shantideva asserts, are inherently fulfilling in their own right, devoid of any anticipation for future recompense.

Stanza 110:

Therefore, just as I safeguard myself

Against becoming debased, to the tiniest extent, Likewise,

I shall act like that toward others

With a protective mind and a mind of compassion.

Shantideva concludes by asserting that because he and all beings are essentially equal, without any fundamental disparity, he will consequently extend the same protection and compassionate care towards others as he would for himself, countering even the slightest criticism and baseless accusations.

Additionally, Shantideva will embark on cultivating a mindset of benevolence, intending to safeguard and nurture others. Furthermore, he will introduce the concept of exchanging oneself for others, initially offering a comprehensive elucidation of it in the following three stanzas.

Stanza 111:

Just as, out of familiarity,

There's an understanding of a "me"

Regarding drops of sperm and blood belonging to others,

Despite it's not existing as some "thing,"

Some may argue that regarding other beings as oneself is an unattainable notion, that such a mindset will never materialize. However, it will indeed come to fruition.

Concerning our own selves, the drops of semen and blood from our parents, though inherently foreign, lack any genuine existence as entities belonging to us, serving as neither the foundation for liberation nor deluded worldly existence. Yet, it is solely due to the persistence of habit that we have developed a sense of identity in connection to them.

Stanza 112:

Why couldn't I likewise take as "me"

A body that belongs to someone else?

After all, it's not difficult to set it, in the same way,

As something other than a body that's "mine."

Given that we can perceive our bodies and minds, which lack any inherent "self-identity," it begs the question: why should it prove challenging to regard the bodies of other individuals (similarly originating from the generative elements of their parents) as our own and become accustomed to such a viewpoint?

Conversely, why, due to habitual conditioning, should it pose a difficulty for us to contemplate this very body of ours as if it were owned by someone else?

Stanza 113:

So, having understood the faultiness of cherishing myself

And the oceans of advantages of cherishing others,

I shall meditate on discarding my way

Of taking a "me," and extend it to others.

The revered spiritual figures have admonished the detrimental nature of self-clinging and the egocentric, self-indulgent mindset that serves as the root cause of suffering in both present and future lives.

Equally, they have extolled the immeasurable, boundless virtues that give rise to happiness and well-being, an elevated state nurtured through selfless altruistic love for others.

In light of this, Shantideva expresses his intent to relinquish all self-centeredness and enthusiastically cultivate the habit of embracing others as an extension of himself.

The concept of exchanging self and other, as delineated in the scriptures, differs from that practiced by yogis. Consequently, while there exist four approaches to this exchange (the exchange of self-cherishing itself, the exchange of the body as the basis for self-imputation, the exchange of joy and suffering, and the exchange of negative and positive actions), Shantideva solely refers to the first three aspects.

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

