

Bodhicaryavatara – Chapter 4 - Conscientiousness

In the last semester, we first reviewed the benefits of bodhicitta and examined the bodhisattva vows – the 18 Major transgressions and 46 Secondary misdeeds that we need to avoid. We then took bodhisattva vows. It is now time to learn how to keep the vows intact and pursue the practices entailed.

When taking those vows, we made the pledge in front of buddhas and bodhisattvas that we will provide temporary and ultimate happiness to all sentient beings. In order to provide ultimate happiness (which is to lead them to Buddhahood), we ourselves need to become buddha first and therefore engage in the bodhisattva practices such as the six perfections. “*Bhākyo*” which is translated as conscientiousness, is the key to maintaining our vows and keeping us on the bodhisattva path. First let’s look at some stanzas from the chapter 3 of Bodhicaryavatara titled Adopting the spirit of Awakening.

Just like a blindman
Discovering a jewel in a heap of rubbish,
Likewise by some coincidence
An Awakening Mind has been born within me.

From now on, by every means possible,
I will apply myself to actions that in accord with
this family.
Never will I sully
This flawless and pure family.

Toward the end of chapter 3, Shantideva reminds us of how fortunate we are to have the opportunity to cultivate bodhicitta (albeit in a contrived way) and take bodhisattva vows. He likens this opportunity to the rarity of a blindman stumbling upon a precious jewel in a heap of rubbish. The blindman has reasons to be happy because the precious jewel can eliminate his poverty and improve his livelihood. Likewise, we too, should be overjoyed at the opportunity to develop bodhicitta and taking bodhisattva vows as it will enrich our happiness and provide many other benefits. However, the blind person’s happiness is contingent on his realizing the value of the precious stone that he has accidentally stumbled upon. Similarly, we too need to recognize our great fortune to be able to cultivate bodhicitta and take bodhisattva vows.

Shantideva refers to this opportunity as a “coincidence” for a reason. Given the way we behave, where virtuous thoughts and actions are a rare occurrence and where mental afflictions and negative actions are frequently happening, it is unlikely for us to encounter such a fortuitous opportunity. Yet, we have obtained precious human rebirth, met the buddhadharma, engage in Mahayana practices and to take bodhisattva vows. It is important to realize the preciousness of this opportunity because failing to do so could result in our failing to put effort into protecting the vows.

Once there is the acknowledgement of the vows’ value, efforts to guard them will ensue. Hence, Shantideva says,

From now on, by every means possible,
I will apply myself to actions that is accord with this family.
Never will I sully
This flawless and pure family.

The family here refers to the bodhisattva family. When we take bodhisattva vows, we became part of the bodhisattva family and it is our responsibility not to cause any stain to this family. For instance, if one is born in a royal family, he/she has to behave like a royal and is expected not to engage in actions that can smear the royal name. Likewise, those of us who have taken the bodhisattva vows are required to conduct our lives according to the bodhisattva practices. Breaking one's vows constitutes defiling the bodhisattva family and therefore, by every means possible, we should work toward keeping our vows intact. As mentioned earlier, *Bhakyoe* is one of key ways to help us in guarding our vows and in pursuing the Bodhisattva path.

Bodhicaryavatara has ten chapters. As we recite the bodhicitta prayer;
May the supreme jewel, Bodhicitta,
that has not arisen arise and grow,
and may that which has arisen not diminish,
but increase more and more.

The first three chapters of Bodhicaryavatara relates to developing bodhicitta that has not been developed. The subsequent three chapters are ways to protect the already developed bodhicitta from degenerating. The remaining chapters are in relation to help increase the bodhicitta that is already cultivated. The three chapters that are focused on guarding the bodhicitta that is already generated are conscientiousness, guarding alertness, and patience. For this semester, we focus on the chapter of conscientiousness or *bhakyoe* in Tibetan. Let's now turn to the chapter on conscientiousness.




Bhakyoe is translated as consciousness or heedfulness. I am not sure whether conscientiousness or heedfulness captures the accurate meaning of the term "*bhakyoe*". So, let's first try to dissect this term and see we can make sense of it. His Holiness describes *bhakyoe* as "a sense of being careful and attentive". The below stanza from Bodhicaryavatara is used to explain what *bhakyoe* is:

Those who practice should be as attentive
As frightened man carrying a jar full of mustard oil

Who is being threatened by someone with a sword
That he will be killed if he spills just one drop.

This paints a picture of a person who is ordered to carry a bowl of mustard oil filled to the brim under the threat of being killed if he spills it. Imagine how careful and alert this person would be. This level of attentiveness and readiness to spring into action is what is meant by *bhakyoe*. Such a watchful mental state is vital even for worldly activities such as driving a car. Motor accidents on account of this are due to the loss of attention. Likewise, when we are reckless and unfocused on our vows, we can easily violate them. Keeping that in mind, lets now turn to the actual text.

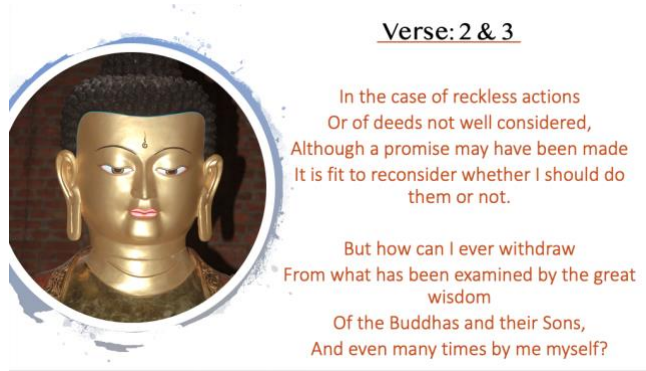


Verse: 1

Having firmly seized the Awakening
Mind in this way,
A Conqueror's son must never waver;
Always should he exert himself
To never stray from his practice.

Shantideva begins the chapter with a summary. He urges those who have taken the bodhisattva vows not to waver from the pledges one had made and exert all efforts to practice the precepts accordingly. The precepts include the six perfections which are means to fulfill one's own goal (to become buddha) and the four means of gathering followers which are the means to fulfill others' goals. When we took the bodhisattva vows, we promised to liberate sentient beings from suffering and provide them temporary and ultimate happiness. The way in which we can liberate sentient beings is by showing them the path and guiding them on the path to enlightenment. However, presently, we do not have the capability to lead even one sentient being to enlightenment, let alone all sentient beings. We can do so when we become Buddha and for that we need to engage in the bodhisattva paths and practices. As such, in order to fulfill our pledges to sentient beings, we should not stray from the promises we made.

One may argue that people break their promises all the time and therefore it is not a big deal to disavow one's pledges. In response, Shantideva argues that the promise one has made when taking bodhisattva vow is different from ordinary pledges.

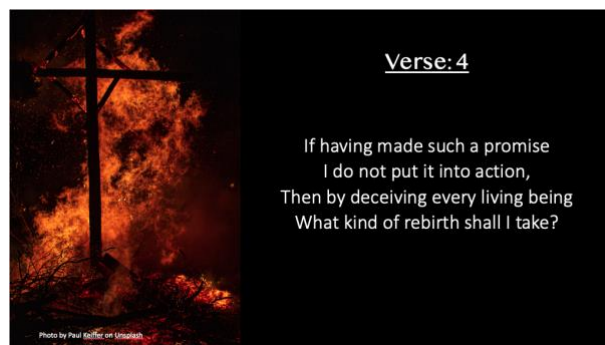


In our life, we make many decisions. Some decisions are rashly made without thorough consideration or are impulsive decisions. Being poorly thought through, one could say those decisions were of a trivial nature or subject to change. However, the decision we made in taking the bodhisattva vows differs in several ways. As stated in the first chapter;

All the Buddhas who have contemplated for many aeons
Have seen it to be beneficial;
For by it the limitless masses of beings
Will quickly attain the supreme state of bliss.

The past buddhas have contemplated for eons on the best way to achieve sublime happiness and found it to be bodhicitta. Buddhas taught from their own direct experience. They developed bodhicitta, took bodhisattva vows and pursued the bodhisattva paths. As a result, they attained enlightenment and achieved impeccable wisdom. As such, the pledge to lead sentient beings to Buddhahood is extolled by those who possess infallible wisdom and is a serious commitment. Our decision to take the bodhisattva vows was made after we reviewed and contemplated on the benefits of bodhicitta, as explained by Shantideva, with logical reasonings. In other words, we did a thorough examination of bodhicitta, saw its merit and took the vows. Further we made the promise in front of buddhas and bodhisattvas. Going back on our promise is like deceiving the buddhas and bodhisattvas. As such, the bodhisattva vow that we took is different from ordinary promises and therefore we ought not renege on the promises we made.

This raises the question of what happens if we break our promises. The following stanza provides the answer. It states what the consequence will be as well as the reason for the consequence.



Shantideva says that rescinding our promise is like deceiving the countless sentient beings whom we have promised to provide all the happiness to. What is the actual promise we made? We made the following promise as stated in chapter three of Bodhicaryavatara:

Today in the presence of Protectors
I invite the world to Sugatahood
And (meanwhile to) temporal happiness.
May the gods, asuras, and others rejoice.

When we took the bodhisattva vows, we have invited all sentient beings to a feast of happiness. Disavowing the vow is like inviting people for a meal and not serving any food. The invited guest would feel deceived and disappointed. However, not following the precepts after taking the bodhisattva vows is far worse. All sentient beings were promised temporary and ultimate happiness which is Buddhahood. When we go back on our word, we are not just deceiving one sentient being; we are deceiving an infinite number of sentient beings and it is therefore a serious violation.

Shantideva says the consequences is a rebirth in hell realm. When we hear about hell, we do not have to think of hell as being a separate world. We can think of it in terms of an extremely painful existence where one's mind is constantly tortured. For instance, we see homeless people living on the streets in Minneapolis during the freezing winter or the many animals and insects that get burned in the Californian forest fires. The pain and suffering they experience can be similar to the sufferings of hell beings. The main point here is that failure to follow the precepts upon taking bodhisattva vows will result in experiencing extreme pain and suffering due to deceiving countless beings. Shantideva provides further support by first quoting the Buddha and then by logical reasoning.

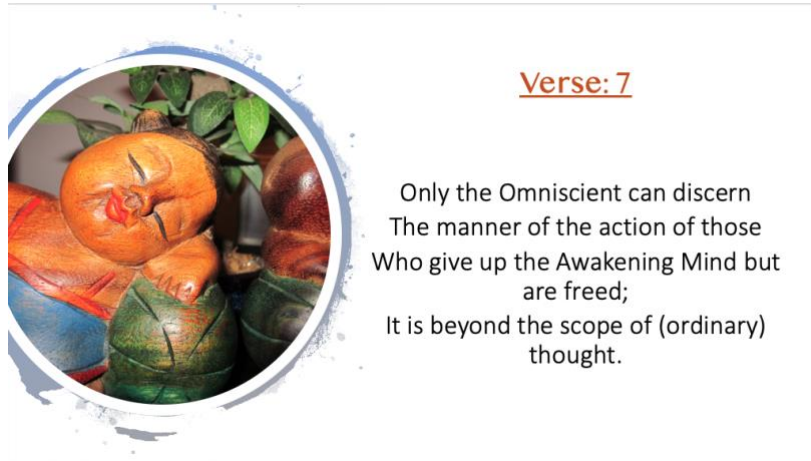
Verse: 5 & 6

If it has taught (by the Buddha)
That he who does not give away
The smallest thing he once intended to give
Will take rebirth as a hungry ghost;

Then if I should deceive all beings
After having sincerely invited them
To the unsurpassable bliss,
Shall I take a happy rebirth?

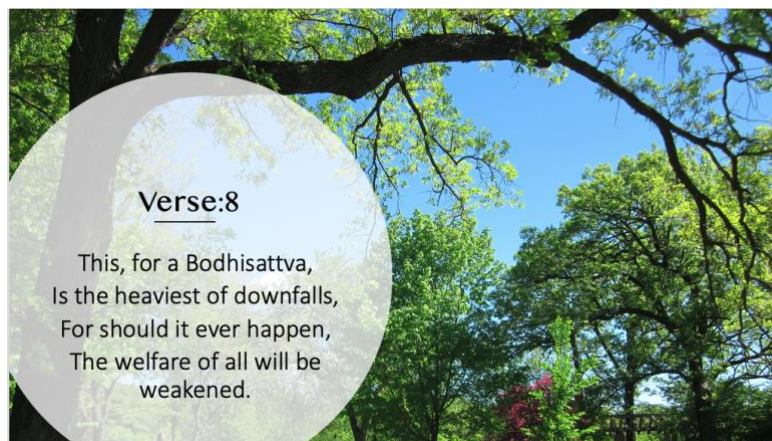
Buddha has taught that when someone does not give away even the smallest thing that he/she first intended to offer will result in rebirth in a hungry ghost world. In this situation, one has not even communicated the intention to the other person. It was just an intention to give. As such, the other person was unaware of the intentions. Even then, its consequence is so grave. In the case of bodhisattva vows, not only did we intend to provide all the happiness to sentient beings, we also declared our intention to the buddhas and bodhisattvas. As such, the ramification of not following through our pledge results in a rebirth in hell realm. This is because of the scope of promises we made. If someone goes back against his promise to treat us to a cup of coffee, we may not be greatly disappointed. However, if we do not get the promotion we were promised, the disappointment

would be greater. The things we have pledged to do for sentient beings are far greater than a mere promotion and hence, the heavy consequences.



This stanza relates to Shariputra. In one of his prior lives, Shariputra was a bodhisattva and was engaging in bodhisattva practices including giving his own body. In order to hinder Shariputra's practices, Mara took a form of a Brahman and approached Shariputra for his right arm. Without any hesitation, Shariputra amputated his right arm and offered it to the Mara. Since Shariputra only had the left hand remaining, he passed the cut arm to Mara with his left and Mara took offence. In India, since the left hand is used for cleaning one's rear end, it is considered disrespectful to offer anything with one's left hand. When Shariputra saw Mara's offence, he felt discouraged and thought it impossible to help all sentient beings and therefore gave up bodhicitta. However, Shariputra was able to enter the path of Listeners and eventually became arhat.

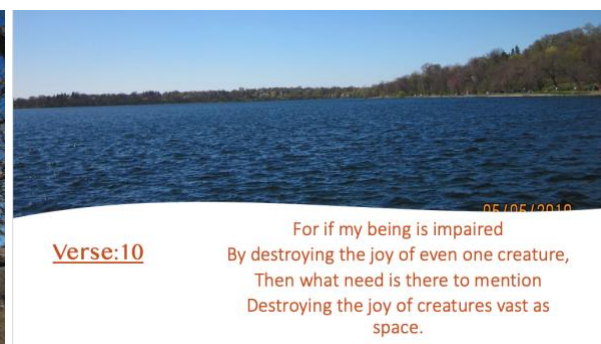
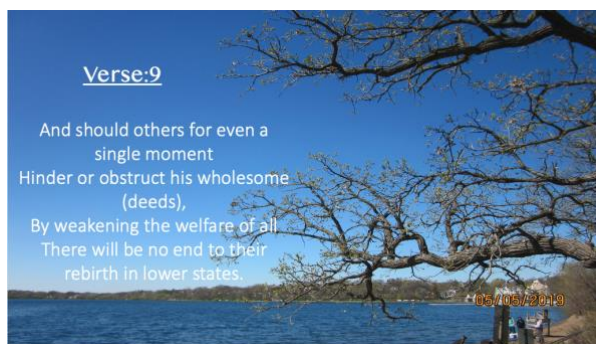
Hence the question is how could Shariputra achieve arhathood after abandoning bodhicitta? The consequences of forsaking bodhicitta are said to be severe and will result in rebirth in lower realms for eons. What do you think was the reason? That Shariputra had a vast store of merits from many past lives that enable him to still pursue the Path albeit not the bodhisattva path? Shantideva did not provide a straight answer. He simply states that only omniscient ones can discern the nuances of the intricate workings of karma. For instance, only the Buddhas can explain in detail, the causes of various colors that made up the peacock's beautiful feathers.



This verse refers to how forsaking bodhicitta and not training in the precepts after taking bodhisattva vows has severe consequences. When we forsake bodhicitta or sentient beings, we commit one of the major transgressions of the bodhisattva vows and thereby commit a heavy negative karma; it means giving up working for the welfare of others; giving up on sentient beings. For instance, we may find that engaging in the bodhisattva paths is too challenging and therefore decide not to continue and instead enter the paths of lower vehicles. This is how we give up bodhicitta and abandon working for other sentient beings. This would be the worst thing to happen to a bodhisattva because this puts an end to the person's journey to enlightenment. Unless and until the person re-enters the Mahayana path, there is no Buddhahood for that person. For that reason, Shantideva says,

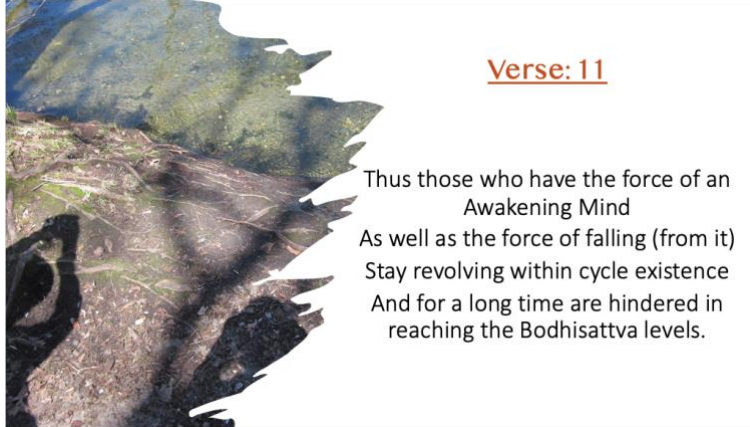
“This, for a bodhisattva,
Is the heaviest of downfalls,
For it should ever happen,
Welfare of all will be weakened.”

Another heavy negative karma is hindering a bodhisattva in his/her practices. As stated in the next



verse (V-9), the consequences of hindering or obstructing bodhisattvas in their wholesome deeds even for a single moment is grave, not to mention causing such hinderance for a long period of time. When one obstructs bodhisattvas' practices, not only does it affect the bodhisattvas themselves but it also impacts other sentient beings who would have been the recipients of bodhisattvas' good deeds. For instance, when we prevent a bodhisattva from engaging in the act of giving shelter and food to the homeless, we obstruct the bodhisattva's creation of merits as well as deny the homeless relief that the bodhisattva intended to give. As such, such an obstruction will bring the person to endless rebirths in lower realms.

The next stanza provides logical reasons for this. If an action that destroys the joy of one person is considered unwholesome, no need to mention an action that destroys the happiness of countless sentient beings. When we hamper a bodhisattva from practicing, we are causing harm to all sentient beings because that bodhisattva is working for their welfare. For instance, when someone creates obstacles to a person who is developing a vaccine for Covid 19, it is harming all those who require vaccination from that deadly disease. For that reason, harming bodhisattvas or obstructing their practice has dire consequences. As we do not know who among us are bodhisattvas, we need to be conscientious about all our actions.



Verse: 11

Thus those who have the force of an
Awakening Mind
As well as the force of falling (from it)
Stay revolving within cycle existence
And for a long time are hindered in
reaching the Bodhisattva levels.

We may argue that since transgressions can be purified, it is not a big deal when we break the vows or fail to train in the precepts. Shantideva refutes this by saying that it will still cause a delay in our progress, namely reaching the first bhumi. Alternating between developing bodhicitta and abandoning it will result in rebirths in higher realms and lower realms respectively. It is like taking one step forward and taking two steps backwards. This way, one will never reach even the first bhumi, let alone Buddhahood. Another analogy used is that of a broken arm. Broken arms can be fixed but they become more vulnerable to future injury. An unbroken arm is better than a fixed one. Hence, we should not take comfort in there being a remedy and letting down our guard. Instead, avoid violating our vows in the first place and this is achieved by adopting conscientiousness all the time.