



Nalandabodhi Connecticut  
Paramita of the Month Newsletter



"Those whose minds are slack and wandering  
Are caught between the fangs of the afflictions."  
-Shantideva, *The Bodhicharyavatara* 8:1

Volume 2 Number 5

---

If we truly wish to be of help to others we must first overcome our own afflictions. In chapter 8 of the Bodhicharyavatara Shantideva describes for us how the path of meditation can help us to achieve this goal. It is his assertion that through mastery of the perfection of meditation we can be of great benefit to others and ourselves.

Shantideva begins his presentation of the path of meditation by reminding us of what keeps our minds occupied and engaged in samsaric existence. He points out in verse three that in solitude our minds and bodies are not troubled by distraction. It is loved ones and desire for gain that prevent us from developing revulsion for mundane existence. Our fierce clinging to those things that are impermanent prevents us from ever being able to rest in equanimity and establish a state of calm abiding. Shantideva instructs us to begin our path by developing revulsion for the objects of our clinging and directs us to strive for the state of calm abiding that results from such renunciation.

Shantideva further instructs that we must be careful with whom we chose to associate while on this path of renunciation and shamatha. In verse 15 he advises us:

"Flee the company of childish people.  
Greet them, when you meet, with smiles  
That keep on terms of pleasant courtesy,  
While not inviting close familiarity."

Because of their fickleness, their obsession with the impermanent, and their jealousy and anger, our interactions with such people will only bring suffering for all involved. No matter what our actions, they will inevitably develop displeasure with us, and their resulting kleshas will do both them and ourselves harm. Shantideva instructs us to be as polite as possible with such persons, to not cause them any suffering, but at the same time not to invite close familiarity with them. Instead he instructs "like bees that get their honey from the flowers, take only what is consonant with the Dharma."

Similarly, Shantideva continues, we should reject obsession with wealth and reputation. All the things we crave, all that we work so hard to accumulate will eventually turn to dust. None of it is permanent and our craving for it to be unchanging causes suffering not only for us but also for others. As for reputation, why should we crave it? While some may praise us it is inevitable that others will revile us. Views and ideals also are impermanent. Again our craving for them to be permanent and our obsession with them causes us to do great harm to others and ourselves. Shantideva extols us:

"Alone we're born, alone we come into the world,  
And when we die, alone we pass away.  
For no one shares our fate, and none our suffering.  
So what are they to me, such "friends" and all their hindrances?"

Thinking these thoughts we should cultivate revulsion for mundane objects, for the impermanent. This will lead to stabilization of our experiences of calm abiding. It is only this, only our state of mind that we take with us into our deaths and rebirths. Shantideva encourages us, after having developed revulsion for samsara, to pacify all of our mental wandering. He encourages us not to allow ourselves to become befuddled by our desires. By developing such calmness in our minds then we may look at the way our minds function and through this insight begin to attack our afflictions.

Specifically, Shantideva next suggests that we closely examine all of our cravings in this life. Shantideva reminds us:

"In this and every other world,  
Desire's the fertile parent of all conflict.  
In this world, bonds and wounds and death,  
In the next, a hell is all prepared."

Our cravings are the source of all our sufferings, and when examined carefully they appear strange indeed. He specifically discusses our lust for our bodies and for other objects of pleasure. Why do we develop such attachment for them? Shantideva asks us:

"Look at this mass of human flesh,  
Soon to be the fare of carrion beasts..."

Look again, these heaps of bones, inert and dead...

You loved them once, when clothed and draped  
Well now they're naked, why do you not want them?  
Ah, you say, your lust is no more there,  
But why did you embrace them, all bedecked and covered?

From food, a single source, come equally  
Their bodies filth, the honey-nectar of their mouths.  
So why are you delighted by saliva,  
And yet revolted by excrement?"

Shantideva continues this analysis stating, "Worldly people's lusts are all confused." We grasp after happiness, a happiness that eternally eludes our grasp, and sell ourselves into slavery in order to pursue our desires. We are like fools ensnared by craving for a livelihood, desirous of making our fortunes. Seeking this gain all we truly reap is slavery. Shantideva extols us, "The trouble of guarding what we have, the pain of losing it all." These are the endless hardships brought on us by the quest for wealth. It is due to being possessed by our many wants that we suffer innumerable troubles. All of this will be lost to us when we die, so why do we pursue it with such vigor? Shantideva states, "but with a millionth part of such vexation enlightenment itself could be attained!"

Reflecting on ideas such as these we should develop the resolve to pacify all discursiveness and cultivate the mind of bodhicitta. The development of this renunciation, the pacification of discursiveness, and the desire to cultivate bodhicitta represent the first level of the perfection of meditation according to Shantideva.

In order to develop bodhicitta Shantideva instructs that we should meditate on the sameness of others, and ourselves, that in joy and sorrow we all are equal. We should see no difference between our suffering and the suffering of others. The only thing that causes us to see these as different is the notion of an "I" born out of our ignorance and confusion. Shantideva asks, "Since we and others are all alike in wanting happiness, what difference is there really to distinguish us? Since we and all others are alike in fleeing suffering, what difference is there really to distinguish us?"

Shantideva's point is clarified further in verses 97-100 of chapter 8 of the Bodhicharyavatara. Here he points out that even our sense of suffering is rooted in ignorance. The idea that "I" will suffer is rooted in a false conception of "I." He argues that in the present moment the current "I" will perish and in the next moment another "I" will arise. We change over time. We ourselves are impermanent. Shantideva urges us to recognize this when he states that a notion with such illogical and deluded roots should be "refuted and dispensed with utterly!" He further asks, if there is no subject of suffering, how is our pain and the pain of others different? Pain is pain. We have no grounds for making such distinctions. Thinking this way we should resolve ourselves to work to alleviate all pain, and develop the mind of relative bodhicitta. Shantideva extols the virtues of such meditation practice by saying:

"Those whose minds are practiced in this way,  
Whose happiness it is to soothe the pain of others,  
Will venture in the hell of unremitting agony,  
Like swans sweep down upon a lotus lake."

Those who practice in this way will not become proud or self-admiring because of their work to benefit beings. Shantideva explains that the happiness of others will itself be their satisfaction. They will not expect any other recompense. This is the development of the second stage of the perfection of meditation according to Shantideva, the perfection of the mind of relative bodhicitta. In this form, originally devoid of an "I", through the process of long habituation, we developed the thought of self. If we practice diligently then why would it be unreasonable to expect that we could, through habit, impute the sense of "I" to all other beings and thus sever our attachment to ourselves and our own bodies. Shantideva states, "If we serve ourselves then we harm another. All the joy the world contains has come through wishing happiness for others. All the misery the world contains has come through wanting pleasure for oneself." If we work towards habituating ourselves in these ideas we will achieve the mind of relative bodhicitta.

When our minds turn completely from selfish thoughts, and do not dwell in discursiveness, at that point our obscurations will clear, our afflictions will be overcome, and our minds can open to the wisdom of ultimate bodhicitta. This perfection of wisdom will be the topic of our last newsletter in this series from the Bodhicharyavatara next month. As a closing contemplation we can reflect upon verses 155-156 from Chapter 8 of Shantideva's Bodhicharyavatara:

"O my mind, what countless ages  
Have you spent in working for yourself?"

And what great weariness it was,  
While your reward was only misery!

The truth therefore is this:  
That you must wholly give yourself and take the other's place.  
The Buddha did not lie in what he said-  
You'll see the benefits that come from it."

---

References:

1. *The Way of the Bodhisattva* Shantideva (1997) Shambhala Press.