

Bodhisattvacharyavatara

(A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life)

By Śāntideva

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Chapter III

Full Acceptance of the Awakening Mind

1

Gladly do I rejoice
 In the virtue that relieves the misery
 Of all those in unfortunate states
 And that places those with suffering in happiness

***Discussion notes** Virtue or 'merit' (Sanskrit puṇya, Pali puñña) is achieved by 'not doing evil' ¹ and by 'doing good'. ²*

As stated in the Metta Sutta, virtue is 'what should be done by one who is skilled in goodness and knows the path of peace'. In terms of the Four Noble Truths, virtue can be developed by practising right wisdom (right view, right resolve), right intention (right speech, right action right livelihood), and right attention (right meditation, right concentration). Less theoretically, virtue can be inculcated by acts of generosity (dāna), ethical behaviour (sīla) and by mental improvement (bhāvāna).

Virtue forms part of the causal and ethical accounting system of kamma (Skt. karma) whereby any accumulation of individual demerit is believed to rebound as unfortunate consequences for that person, either in this very life or with regard to the nature and circumstances of their next rebirth. Thus, virtuous behaviour is beneficial in two ways: firstly, virtue is beneficial for the recipient, and secondly, virtue is beneficial for the agent – the person who performs the virtuous deed. ³

2

I rejoice in that gathering of virtue
 That is the cause of (the Arhat's) Awakening
 I rejoice in the definite freedom of embodied creatures
 From the miseries of cyclic existence.

3

I rejoice in the Awakening of the Buddhas
 And also in the spiritual levels of their sons.

4

And with gladness I rejoice
 In the ocean of virtue from developing the Awakening Mind [*bodhicitta*]
 That wishes all beings to be happy,
 As well as the deeds that bring them benefit.

Bodhicitta is the initial aspiration to achieve enlightenment for the sake of helping all other sentient beings.

5

With folded hands I beseech
 The Buddhas of all directions
 To shine the lamp of Dharma
 For all bewitched in misery's gloom.

6

With folded hands I beseech
 The Conquerors who wish to pass away,
 To please remain for endless aeons
 And not to leave the world in darkness

There is an implicit Mahāyāna assumption here that Bodhisattvas (persons on the verge of enlightenment) decide to postpone their escape from the rounds of rebirth in order to assist all other sentient beings.

7

Thus by the virtue collected
 Through all that I have done
 May the pain of every living creature
 Be completely cleared away.

This verse assumes the concept of 'transfer of merit'. This is the means by which virtuous persons, especially monks and Bodhisattvas, can transfer some of their balance of wholesome karma to others, in order to alleviate the suffering of persons who are suffering because of their own accumulation of unwholesome karma.

8

May I be the doctor and the medicine
 And may I be the nurse
 For all sick beings in the world
 Until everyone is healed.

Śantideva's ideal bodhicitta aspiration is as unlimited as the scope of the Mahāyāna imagination.

9

May a rain of food and drink descend
To clear away the pain of thirst and hunger
And during the aeon of famine
May I myself change into food and drink.

Śantideva's level of self-abnegation is astounding. There are parallels here with self-sacrificial Chöd visualisation practices in Tantra, some of which involve imagining being butchered and served up to fierce deities in a bowl made from one's skull. These are imaginative fictions, rather than virtuous deeds, but they are designed to cut through egocentric attachment to the concept of self.

10

May I become an inexhaustible treasure
For those who are poor and destitute;
May I turn into all things they could need
And may I be placed close beside them.

*From a western, Christian perspective, these aspirations might be criticised as being more beneficial for the agent of virtue than for any possible recipient, for nobody is fed and watered unless sustenance is actually provided. But that criticism can be countered, with the argument that these are author's exemplary words, which are intended to be put into action by the reader, and it is up to the reader to decide on the most appropriate practical actions to undertake. '...generosity can also help or harm beings, and so when making decisions bodhisattvas need to consider and calculate this potential benefit and harm.'*⁴

*Western charitable organisations have sometimes concentrated on alleviating pressing needs despite the underlying, systematic, political, environmental and economic causes of poverty and inequality. The Buddhist ethical imperative is not just to 'begin to do good', but to 'cease to do harm'.*⁵

11

Without any sense of loss
I shall give up my body and enjoyments
As well as my virtues of the three times
For the sake of benefitting all.

Thus, Śantideva not only dedicates his life to the service of others, but also the merit (puṇya) he accrues in the past, present and in the future.

12

By giving up all, sorrow is transcended
 And my mind will realise the sorrowless state
 It is best that I (now) give everything to all beings
 In the same way as I shall (at death).

In conformity with the message of the Four Noble Truths, it is thirst, craving, clinging or attachment to anything (concrete or abstract) in this world that is the root cause of sorrow. Like tidying one's room, it may be worth reflecting on the relative value of chattels and all other things, as another way of tidying one's mind.

13

Having given this body up
 For the pleasure of all living beings
 By killing, abusing and beating it
 May they always do as they please.

Verses 13-17 go even further than the Christian attitude of 'turning the other cheek', to illustrate complete passivity in the face of those who may enjoy causing actual bodily harm. In an age of individual human rights, with greater awareness of what some persons will do out of desire for domination and sadistic gratification, these verses are disturbing. From the point of view of the agent of virtue, such passivity illustrates the full extent of loving-kindness: the self-sacrificial motivation of the agent of virtue is unsullied by taking the motivations of the other person into consideration. But it is clear in verse 15 and that the other person is taken into consideration, since they are not let do anything that would 'cause them harm', and it is hoped that their angry, mocking, insulting behaviours will eventually be transmuted into attitudes more conducive to awakening: some sort of revolution in the direction of their destructive attitudes. Still, these verses are disturbing to contemporary sensibility.

14

Although they may play with my body
 And make it a source of jest and blame
 Because I have given it up to them
 What is the use of holding it dear?

15

Therefore I shall let them do anything to it
 That does not cause them any harm,
 And when anyone encounters me
 May it never be meaningless for [them].

16

If in those who encounter me
 A faithful or angry thought arises
 May that eternally become the source
 For fulfilling their wishes.

17

May all who say bad things to me
 Or cause me any other harm,
 And those who mock and insult me
 Have the fortune to fully awaken.

18

May I be a protector for those without one,
 A guide for all travellers on the way;
 May I be a bridge, a boat, a ship
 For all those who wish to cross (the water).

Verses 18 and 19 drive home the overall altruistic message with a host of simple, everyday, broadly positive metaphors, mostly associated with the metaphor of ethical improvement as a 'path'. It is on a journey that people are most in need of guidance and protection, and they need particular assistance when crossing stretches of water. The only inappropriate metaphor is that of 'a slave for all who want a slave' which falls foul of the contemporary understanding of human rights for all.

19

May I be an island for those who seek one
 And a lamp for those desiring light,
 May I be a bed for those who wish to rest
 And a slave for all who want a slave.

20

May I be a wishing jewel, a magic vase,
 Powerful mantras and great medicine,
 May I become a wish-fulfilling tree
 And a cow of plenty for the world.

Verse 20 uses common Buddhist symbols for both worldly good fortune, such as material wealth, and transcendental good fortune, in the form of liberation from suffering. The delightful metaphor of the 'cow of plenty' (Skt. Kāmadhenu) is more of a Vedic symbol. Its appearance here reflects the syncretic thought-scape of 8th century

medieval India, when Buddhism ideas and practices were heavily influenced by Hinduism, particularly Vishnavite Tantrism.

21

Just like space
And the great elements such as earth,
May I always support the life
Of all the boundless creatures.

22

And until they pass away from pain
May I also be the source of life
For all the realms of varied beings
That reach unto the ends of space.

Verses 20-21 illustrate Śāntideva's vertiginous desire to become one with the metaphysical conditions of existence – effectively to become a divine controller of space and life – in order to better alleviate the sufferings of all beings in this and any other world. It seems that, in the Mahāyāna tradition of late ancient and early medieval India, the concepts of enlightening being (Bodhisattva) and enlightened being (Buddha) have undergone a considerable expansion of meaning. From a single being who has blown out the three fires of greed hatred and delusion and, therefore, no longer generates the karma that motivates the cycle of rebirth, the historical Buddha (nirmāṅkaya) has become just one of many manifestations (sambhogakāya) of an archetypal absolute Buddha (dharmakāya). This is the doctrine of three bodies (trikāya) of the Buddha, which bears striking similarity to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. Different traditions have differing views about the nature or 'ontological status' of this teaching: either it is a skilful work of the imagination: a 'personification', or it is an accurate description of 'ultimate' reality. From the perspective of a diligent practitioner along the Buddhist path, that difference may not be particularly relevant, so long as the teaching turns out to be effective.

Along the lines of the (interesting but questionable) theory that there are two levels of truth, one 'conventional' and the other 'ultimate', it could be argued that the trikāya doctrine is actually a conventional truth, in that it implies the actual existence of things and types of things, such as Buddhas. The ultimate truth is that there are no things, just momentary bundles of causal efficiency, wherein nothing has self-existence. Things are empty of self-existence (śūnyatā) precisely because everything depends for its existence upon a vast network of causes and conditions that are other than itself. But the truth-question remains: are there, amongst everything that is the case, a succession of momentary causal bundles that fit the meaningful descriptions of enlightened beings that are found in the trikāya doctrine?

23

Just as the previous Sugatas
Gave birth to an Awakening Mind,
And just as they successively dwelt
In the Bodhisattva practices;

Verses 23-34 constitute a devotional song of praise to the Awakening Mind (bodhicitta) as the essential first step that opens up the way to the liberation from suffering of oneself and of all sentient beings.

24

Likewise for the sake of all that lives
Do I give birth to an Awakening Mind,
And likewise shall I too
Successively follow the practices.

As well as practice according to the ‘wheel-spokes’ of the Eight-fold Path, many other lists of practices have been developed over the centuries. For instance, in the Pali texts there are ten perfections⁶ (paramīs): giving (dāna), virtue (sīla), renunciation (nekkhamma), wisdom (pañña), energy (viriya), patience (khanti), truthfulness (sacca), determination (adhiṭṭhana), loving-kindness (metta) and equanimity (upekkhā). Or, the shorter Mahāyāna list of six perfections⁷ (Skt. paramitās): giving (dāna), virtue (sīla), patience (kṣānti), energy (vīrya), meditation (dhyāna), and wisdom (prajña). That list is expanded to thirty-seven practices in the Tibetan tradition.⁸

25

In order to further increase it from now on,
Those with discernment who have lucidly seized
An Awakening Mind in this way,
Should highly praise it in the following manner:

26

Today my life has (borne) fruit;
(Having) well obtained this human existence,
I’ve been born in the family of the Buddha
And now am one of the Buddha’s sons.

The Buddha’s sons are his followers: the four-fold sangha of monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen. These days, it is less misogynist, and more accurate, to speak of the Buddha’s daughters and sons.

27

Thus whatever actions I do from now on
 Must be in accord with the family.
 Never shall I disgrace or pollute
 This noble and unsullied race.

Realistically, it must be remembered that, over the centuries, there have been countless persons who have disgraced the four-fold sangha, but many more who have behaved in diligent accordance with verse 27.

28

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

29

It is the supreme ambrosia
 That overcomes the sovereignty of death.
 It is the inexhaustible treasure
 That eliminates all poverty in the world.

30

It is the supreme medicine
 That quells the world's disease.
 It is the tree that shelters all beings
 Wandering and tired on the path of conditioned existence.

31

It is the universal bridge
 That leads to freedom from unhappy states of birth,
 It is the dawning moon of the mind
 That dispels the torment of 'disturbing conceptions'. (Skt: *klesha*)

It is not necessary to believe in rebirth in order to free oneself from unhappy states in this very life.

32

It is the great sun that finally removes
 The misty ignorance of the world,
 It is the quintessential butter
 From the churning of the milk of Dharma.

33

For all those guests travelling on the path of conditioned existence
 Who wish to experience the bounties of happiness,
 This will satisfy them with joy
 And actually place them in supreme bliss.

34

Today in the presence of all the Protectors
 I invite the world to be guests
 At (a festival of) temporary and ultimate delight
 May gods, anti-gods and all be joyful.

Śantideva's notion of a virtuous life on the Bodhisattva path is not dull. Thus, the chapter ends with a party invitation.

¹ Dogen, *Shobogenzo*, trans. Thomas Cleary, 1992, 'Do Not Do Anything Evil', in *Rational Zen, the Mind of Dōgen Zenji*, (Boston, Shambala), pp.85-94, 128-145.

² Dhammapada 183.

³ Fink, Charles, K., 2013, 'The Cultivation of Virtue in Buddhist Ethics', in *The Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, Vol. 20.

⁴ Clayton in Fink 2013. Clayton, Barbra, 2009, 'Śantideva, Virtue and Consequentialism', in *Destroying Mara Forever: Essays in Honor of Damian Keown*, ed. John Powers and Charles S. Prebish, pp. 15 – 29, (Ithaca, Snow Lion).

⁵ Dhammapada 183.

⁶ Dhammapala, Acariya, ? A Treatise on the Paramis, from the Commentary on the Cariyapitaka, trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans. (2005), <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/bodhi/wheel409.html> Accessed 28/03/21.

⁷ Wright, Dale S., 2009, *The Six Perfections and the Cultivation of Character*, (Oxford, O.U.P.).

⁸ Gyelse Tokme Zangpo (b. 1295) <https://www.37practices.info/> Accessed 28/03/21.
 For commentaries on the text: <https://www.37practices.info/books/>