

**Transcript of the teachings by Khen Rinpoche Geshe Chonyi on
*Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds, 2014***

Root text: *Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds* by Shantideva, translated by Toh Sze Gee. Copyright: Toh Sze Gee, 2006; Revised edition, 2014.

Lesson 5**20 February 2014**

Reflecting on impermanence, suffering and selflessness. Chapter One, verses 1.21-1.25: Reasons for benefits of bodhicitta and establishing the benefits by means of logic and reasoning.

REFLECTING ON IMPERMANENCE, SUFFERING AND SELFLESSNESS

Returning to our discussion on impermanence, the real meaning of impermanence is momentary disintegration. Because compounded (or composed) phenomena undergo change in each and every moment, therefore they are impermanent. We should apply this understanding of impermanence to our body and mind, understanding how they also undergo momentary disintegration. By looking at how we ourselves, our body and mind are undergoing change in every single moment, because of that, we, our body and mind are impermanent.

Because it is impermanent, it is suffering

Going back to what I brought up in the first lesson on the above statement. We, our body and mind are impermanent and undergo momentary disintegration. We, our body and mind undergo momentary disintegration without a choice, i.e., being the products of our karma and afflictions; we helplessly and powerlessly undergo momentary disintegration. Because of our karma and afflictions, we, our body and mind undergo momentary disintegration. Because we ourselves, our body and mind undergo momentary disintegration due to the power of our karma and afflictions, therefore they are in the nature of suffering.

- We ourselves and our body and mind complex, i.e., our aggregates, undergo momentary change. Therefore they are impermanent.
- They undergo momentary change due to the power of our karma and afflictions. As such, they are in the nature of suffering.

What is the link between this and selflessness for it is said:

Because it is suffering, it is selfless.

There are a few ways of interpreting the meaning and the relationship between these two. One interpretation is this: Earlier we said that we ourselves and our aggregates, our body and mind, are in the nature of suffering because we are under the control of our karma and afflictions, i.e., we are under the control and influence of something

other than ourselves. Because of this, we can say that we ourselves, our body and mind are empty of an independent self, i.e., there cannot be an independent self. This is a reason to establish that our body and mind are selfless and to establish that the self does not exist independently.

This present discussion and its related discussions in the past are mainly for the older students, especially those who have studied some of the previous modules such as tenets and so forth. It is very important that they think about these statements:

Because it is impermanent, it is suffering.
Because it is suffering, it is selfless.

This gives you an idea of how to contemplate when you see these two basic statements and to try to find the relationship between them. It also helps you to establish how the former statement is the reason for establishing the latter statement.

All composed phenomena such as our body and mind are impermanent because they undergo momentary change. We are in the nature of suffering and our body and mind are in the nature of suffering because they are under the control of our karma and afflictions. As such, it is not reasonable to have very strong grasping and attachment to our body and mind because they are in the nature of suffering. This is another way of explaining how it is selfless because it is in the nature of suffering.

I have given you two interpretations, i.e., two ways of looking at the relationship between the nature of suffering and selflessness so keep them in mind. Thinking, “Because it is impermanent, it is suffering. Because it is suffering, it is selfless,” is taking a first step in working to reduce our anger and attachment.

- By thinking of the impermanence of our own body and mind, when we understand this well, naturally our afflictions will subside.
- In addition when we can contemplate how we, our body and mind are in the nature of suffering, of course that will also help very much in reducing our afflictions.
- When we can reflect well on the meaning of selflessness, our afflictions will also naturally decline.

We will experience more peace and happiness when our afflictions are weaker.

When we can remember and reflect on these two statements—“Because it is impermanent, it is suffering. Because it is suffering, it is selfless”—it will be helpful especially at those times when our minds are distracted or disturbed. This is a method of working with our afflictions.

Afflictions can also arise when things are going well, when we have this idea, “Everything is going well. Everything is fine.” This is the situation for strong attachment to arise, especially the complete preoccupation with the happiness of this life alone. In order to counteract this attachment, we can reflect on these three things (impermanence, suffering and selflessness). Likewise, when we are disturbed or when the mind is depressed and unhappy, we could also think about these three things.

The best antidote to the afflictions is to meditate on selflessness or emptiness. But this is quite impossible and out of reach for us. There is also the meditation on bodhicitta but that is also really difficult. However what is within our reach and what is highly possible is for us to think about how we ourselves, our body and mind are by nature impermanent and in the nature of suffering. This is highly accessible and within our reach, something that we can understand much more easily, making it easier for us to put into practice. So this is the first step that we must take rather than thinking about emptiness or bodhicitta.

It is mentioned in the stages of the path to enlightenment literature that amongst all the ideas, the idea of impermanence is the most powerful. Whether the reflection on impermanence will really help you or not is something that you have to discover for yourself. You have to think about it. Try it out especially during those times when you are completely absorbed and preoccupied with the happiness of this life, i.e., when things are going well, or when you are feeling down and disturbed. When you reflect and meditate on the impermanence of things and events in life, see whether it helps or not. You have to discover this for yourself.

The correct reflection and meditation on impermanence will not lead to further depression or further unhappiness. The correct reflection on impermanence is very helpful for the mind. It really calms the mind. Furthermore the correct reflection of impermanence gives courage and determination. It can also lead to strengthening one's love for others and so forth.

For example, when you understand that you may die tomorrow, i.e., you have this strong idea, "I'm going to die tomorrow," then suddenly, you find that there is no reason to be upset anymore. What is the point of getting angry when you know for sure that you will die tomorrow?

When you understand that you are going to die tomorrow, you are able to let go of your possessions easily. When you know you are going to die, you see that there is no point clinging to them. When you really know how to think about impermanence, this will be the experience. With that kind of mindset, I think that with whatever remaining lifespan you may have, you will use it in a more meaningful way.

When one understands that life is short, what is the point of living it in a miserable way? What is the point of being unhappy all the time? What is the point of accumulating non-virtue? It is pointless. So such thoughts arise due to reflecting on impermanence. One may also develop thoughts of engaging in virtue and activities that will make one calm and peaceful and be of help to others.

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There are some corrections<sup>1</sup> to be made to the boundaries of the four types of mind generation as explained in the last lesson.

We divided mind generation in terms of their boundaries of which there are four.

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<sup>1</sup> The corrections have already been made in lesson 4.

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| <i>Boundaries</i> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Ordinary bodhisattva on the Mahayana path of accumulation and path of preparation – mind generation of aspiring conduct (or the bodhicitta that comes from belief)</li> <li>2. Superior bodhisattva on the 1st to 7th grounds – mind generation of pure noble intention (or pure superior intent mind generation)</li> <li>3. Superior bodhisattva on the 8th, 9th and 10th grounds – mind generation of full maturation (or fully ripened mind generation)</li> <li>4. Buddha superior on the buddha ground - mind generation free from all obscurations (or obscuration abandoning mind generation)</li> </ol> |
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Another point to note is these two words, bodhicitta and mind generation. They often mean the same thing and are used interchangeably but there is a difference between these two terms:

- Bodhicitta exists from the Mahayana path of accumulation up to the tenth ground in the continuum of a bodhisattva.
- The Mahayana mind generation exists from the Mahayana path of accumulation up to full enlightenment.

We have finished the section on the benefits of both the aspirational and engaged mind generation.

### **THE REASONS FOR SUCH BENEFITS**

#### *Establishing the benefits by quoting scripture*

In the last lesson, I said verse 1.20 might be a source for stating the benefits of aspirational bodhicitta. But in the commentary it seems clear that verse 1.20 is related to the benefits of engaged bodhicitta, i.e., the Buddha himself stated the benefits of engaged bodhicitta in the *Sutra Requested by Subahu*.<sup>2</sup> It is said in this sutra that the Buddha talked about the immeasurable benefits of bodhicitta for the sake of those who are of indefinite Hinayana lineage.

#### *Establishing the benefits by means of logic and reasoning*

Next is establishing that aspirational bodhicitta and engaged bodhicitta do have those benefits as stated. First Verses 1.21 and 1.22 establish with reasoning that aspirational bodhicitta do indeed have those benefits.

#### Verse 1.21

If even the thought to relieve  
Sentient beings of merely a headache  
Possesses the attitude to benefit  
And possesses boundless merit,

<sup>2</sup> The quotation from the *Subahupariprccha Sutra* reads: "If one perseveres for the sake of bringing happiness and benefit to an infinite number of beings, then the infinite roots of virtue from this infinite aim that bears in mind the happiness and benefit of all sentient beings shall increase, expand and reach towards fulfilment every moment, day and night, regardless of whether one is unconscious or even asleep." (*A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, translated by Stephen Batchelor, Copyright: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, Dharamsala, 1979, page 170).

## Verse 1.22

Then what need is there to mention  
 The desire to dispel the boundless unhappiness of each sentient being  
 And to accomplish boundless good qualities  
 Of every single one of them?

Once there was this householder, a layperson, who wanted to explore the oceans for treasure. His mother heard about this and pleaded with him not to go because it was very dangerous. The mother cried and clung to his legs, not allowing him to go. The son got upset and scolded his mother saying, “All this talk of yours, holding on to me and crying is really inauspicious.” He then kicked his mother in the head.

He then travelled to the ocean to look for treasure. Somehow the ship he was in split into half and began to sink. He was able to hold on to some planks that were remnants of the ship and he floated along in the sea. One day he managed to find dry land. He came upon an island that initially looked very attractive and pleasant.

Then he saw a spinning iron wheel. Immediately upon seeing the wheel, it descended on his head and started cutting up his head. He felt so much pain. There and then he realised that this was the ripening of his own karma of kicking his mother in the head. He knew and understood that this was definitely the case.

He then generated the thought, “May my experience of this immense pain and headache be a substitute for the suffering of others who will have to experience something similar. May my experience of this intense pain purify the negative karma of others who have created a similar karma.”

Immediately upon having that pure virtuous thought, he passed away and was reborn in the celestial realms.

This is the story behind Verse 1. 21.

Our parents are immeasurably kind to us and therefore, for us, they are very powerful objects because of that immense kindness. The lesson that we can draw from this story is that we have to take good care of our parents and be respectful of them.

*Khen Rinpoche: When I was reading this story, I remembered my mother was telling me a story. It was three, four years ago. One day, in my room, she told me this story about my childhood.*

*I think she said I was about two and a half years old at that time. I was very young. My mother and father had already planned to go to India from Nepal. At that time, when they go to India, they would have to walk for a week to reach the border and then take a bus from there. They had already planned to go to India for business or something like that.*

*They left me behind with my grandmother and grandfather. My grandparents' house was quite a distance away, maybe two to three hours walking distance from my home. I think she said she put me there.*

*One or two days after she brought me to my grandparents' house, she was supposed to leave for India. Then my mother had a dream. She dreamt that I said to her, "Mother, don't go" and that I was holding on to her leg. She dreamt that I was really crying very hard and holding on to her leg, "Please don't go. Please don't go." She had this dream.*

*The next morning she was supposed to leave for India as planned. Somehow she didn't feel comfortable so she didn't go to India. Instead she came to the grandparents' house to pick me up. She decided not to go for her trip.*

*Of course I don't remember anything. Did I cry or hold on to her? I don't know.*

*My mother cancelled her trip. My mother said that after one week I was so sick that I almost died. She mentioned that had she left for India, I would have been dead.*

*She told me this story. At that time, I felt that she was really kind to have sacrificed her entire trip. Because of her dream, she cancelled her trip. So I feel quite touched when my mother told me this story. I didn't cry but I felt really touched.*

*I mean for a mother it is just a simple thing. But what she did, she really sacrificed herself. I think for everyone it is the same. Somehow they help us a lot. They sacrifice their lives for us. So when I was reading this story of the mother holding on to her son's leg, I remembered my mother.*

Our parents are immeasurably kind to us so as much as possible we have to take care of them.

Back to this householder who merely generated the thought that his experience of the pain to be a substitute for all those who have similar karma. It is as simple a thought as that. But due to that thought, he passed away from that life and was freed from that pain. He was reborn as a worldly god in the celestial realm.

If a mere thought has so much benefit, it goes without saying that having the intention to free all sentient beings from their suffering and to establish them in the highest happiness would have boundless benefits.

Often people wonder and some even ask, "What benefit can there be just by having a thought? It is a good thought but how can it be of any real benefit?" But you should be able to see that when we are talking about actual bodhicitta, when one is able to generate the uncontrived, fully qualified, actual realisation of bodhicitta, even though this bodhicitta may not be directly conjoined with any of the bodhisattva deeds, that pure actual bodhicitta itself will bring about boundless benefits.

Next we continue with the benefits of aspirational bodhicitta.

## Verse 1.23

Who has such an altruistic intention as this?  
Do even fathers and mothers have it?  
Do the gods and sages?  
Does even Brahma have it?

In general, fathers and mothers are usually considered to be authority in one's life and as good and kind people. They have good thoughts and good intentions for their children. What do they wish for? Generally, they wish for their children to have long lives, good health, to have wealth and prosperity and to have power. This is about it. They do not wish for their children to achieve enlightenment. They do not have aspirational bodhicitta. They do not have such an intention. You could say that parents do not think about bodhicitta because they do not know that such a thing exists and they do not know how to generate such a thought.

How about the gods and sages who are said to possess supernatural powers such as clairvoyance and so forth? Even they do not have bodhicitta. Most of the gods, the celestial beings and the worldly gods including nagas have super-human abilities and supernatural abilities and powers. Some can read the minds of others, some can look into the past but nevertheless they do not have bodhicitta. They do not have the thought, "I must achieve omniscience in order to accomplish the welfare of others." They do not even have aspirational bodhicitta. You could say that these gods and sages do not have bodhicitta because they do not have the thought of benefiting others.

What about Brahma? In order to be born as Brahma, one must have cultivated the practice of the four immeasurables, i.e., immeasurable love, compassion, joy and equanimity. But even Brahma who has cultivated the practice of the four immeasurables does not have bodhicitta. He does not have the thought, "I will achieve full enlightenment in order to accomplish the welfares of others."

- Immeasurable love is the thought wanting others to have happiness. It is an antidote to malice or ill will.
- Immeasurable compassion is the thought wishing others to be free from suffering. It is an antidote to belligerence, which is a derivative of anger.
- Immeasurable joy is the thought of not wanting others to be separated from happiness and is the antidote to dislike.
- Immeasurable equanimity is the thought wanting sentient beings to be free of afflictions and is an antidote to the afflictions such as anger and attachment.

| <b>Four immeasurables</b> |                                                           |                                                      |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|
| Immeasurable love         | Thought wanting others to have happiness                  | Antidote to malice or ill will                       |
| Immeasurable compassion   | Thought wishing others to be freed from suffering         | Antidote to belligerence                             |
| Immeasurable joy          | Thought not wanting others to be separated from happiness | Antidote to dislike                                  |
| Immeasurable equanimity   | Thought wanting sentient beings to be free of afflictions | Antidote to afflictions such as anger and attachment |

In order to be able to meditate on bodhicitta, first one must have meditated on and cultivated compassion. In order to have a good meditation and cultivation of compassion, this must be preceded by the good cultivation of love. In relation to all sentient beings—even if we are not able to practise exactly as it is taught in the stages of the path to enlightenment, the lam-rim—if we can have the thought from our heart that wants everyone to be happy and to be freed from suffering, for us, that is love and compassion. Then we can also have the feeling from our heart, “May everyone not be parted from happiness and may everyone be freed of their afflictions.”

When we can think about these four immeasurables—love, compassion, joy and equanimity—a good reflection can bring about some thought of love, compassion, joy and equanimity. Just the mere arising of these thoughts can lessen whatever malice and anger that we may have. With these reflections, we can reduce our anger and attachment. Only when we have reduced our anger and attachment can the thought of wanting to help and to benefit others arise.

Sometimes people do wonder, “Is there any real benefit to just sitting there and generating some good intentions, for example, hoping, ‘May others be happy?’” When you think about this, there is really some actual benefit. The mind does change. When all the afflictions decrease, the thought of wanting to do something to benefit others can then arise. Isn’t that is a benefit?

People do wonder at all these instructions for developing bodhicitta and so forth. There is so much to do and they are so difficult to do. At the end of the day, what should one do? At our level, this is something practical and within our reach. It is not as if we are not able to think of love and compassion. It is possible for us to do that, isn’t it? We just have to sit down and try to think along those lines, “Wanting others to be happy whoever they may be, including the enemies; wanting others to be free from suffering, including the enemies.” When it gets down to the actual practice and the actual work of generating bodhicitta, of course it is challenging. At this level, we are not required to actually do something. We just have to sit down and first change our way of thinking.

*Khen Rinpoche: This is easy. You just sit down and think. That is all. You don’t need to do much. You only need your nice comfortable cushion, you sit down and you just think. It is as simple as that. Can or not?*

As I said earlier, whether you are talking about love or compassion, the strongest thought to have in the beginning is thinking about impermanence—how we ourselves are impermanent and disintegrating in each and every moment, how our loved ones and the people that we dislike are also changing and disintegrating in each and every moment. With this thought of impermanence as the basis, it will be much easier for us to contemplate on love and compassion. This is something that everyone of us has to do for ourselves. We have to put aside time to sit down, turn inwards and reflect. When we do not think about it, we do not sit and contemplate, of course, nothing will happen. There will be no change. We have to try this for ourselves by putting aside some time, not less than five minutes, and see whether we experience any change or not.



## Verse 1.24

If those beings have not  
 Even dreamt before of such an attitude  
 For their own welfare in their dreams,  
 How can they generate it for the welfare of others?

Even sentient beings such as our parents, the gods, the sages and even Brahma have never ever wanted enlightenment for their own sake. This thought has not even arisen in their dreams. Then how is it possible for them to have actual bodhicitta? How would they even think of achieving omniscience to accomplish the welfare of others?

## Verse 1.25

Such a mind of welfare of sentient beings  
 Does not arise even for their own sake;  
 An outstanding jewel of the mind,  
 An unprecedented wonder is born.

The commentary says that this precious superior mind of the bodhisattva that wishes to attain enlightenment in order to place all sentient beings in happiness and for all sentient beings to abandon all of their suffering has not been generated, even for a moment, by other sentient beings for themselves. So other sentient beings should also regard the generation of this exalted mind that has not arisen for themselves before as praiseworthy. They should strive to attain it.

Bodhicitta is an exalted and very special mind. When it exists in anyone's mind, it would be such a wonder. It will really be praiseworthy. The arising of actual bodhicitta has to arise due to relying on the Mahayana virtuous friend.

It is said that there are wish-granting trees in the celestial realm. You can liken the generation of bodhicitta to finding and having such a wish-granting tree on this planet. When you look at the commentary on the practice of offering the mandala, it is explained that the wish-granting tree is made up of precious jewels. The roots are made of gold, the branches are made of lapis lazuli, the fruits are made of diamonds and so forth. It is wish-granting in that whatever you desire and ask of it, wealth and so forth, the tree can bestow them. Such trees are said to exist in the celestial realm. Bodhicitta is likened to such a wish-granting tree in that when it arises, it can fulfil all one's hopes.

*Khen Rinpoche: Talking about the wish-granting tree. A long time ago, I went to Sai Baba's place. Sai Baba, the Hindu master. In 1980 I went there for a holiday because it was very cheap to do so. All the food was free and the rooms were only six rupees per day. Something like that. I spent three days there.*

*There was a tree on a hill. People said that this tree will grant whatever you wished. It was said that the tree was manifested by Sai Baba. You want a banana, the tree will give you a banana. You want an apple, you will get an apple. There was this tree near his cave. It was mentioned that it was a wish-granting tree. I am not saying that is the real wish-granting tree.*

There are different kinds of super-knowledges or super human abilities. When we talk about magical powers, the best kind of magical powers arises from having certain levels of concentration. One can also have magical powers by reciting mantras or by depending on external substances. The magical powers that arise from meditating on concentration are said to be real and very powerful.

Next is establishing the validity of the benefits of engaged bodhicitta. We will stop here for today. In the next lesson, we will finish the rest of chapter one.

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Question: I refer to the earlier verses starting from Verse 1.9 and the few verses that follow before the divisions of the bodhicitta were explained. The bodhicitta that is referred to as the mind of enlightenment, are we talking about aspirational bodhicitta or engaged bodhicitta?

Answer: It is bodhicitta in general.

Question: Is there an order in the generation of the two bodhicittas, i.e., aspirational bodhicitta must precede engaged bodhicitta? Must you have engaged bodhicitta to enter the Mahayana Path?

Answer: Whether it is an aspirational mind generation or engaged mind generation, both are fully qualified mind generations. Whoever has generated such a mind, that person is a Mahayanist. It is certain that such mind generations do not exist in the continua of those who have not entered the path.

As to whether the generation of aspirational bodhicitta must precede the generation of engaged bodhicitta, this is a very big question. It is not so straightforward and it is not clear in the text.

I remembered seeing something like this: The first mind generation that arises is the aspirational bodhicitta. But I don't remember exactly which text states this. What this statement means is another matter.

It is clear in the text that the mind generation in the continuum of a bodhisattva superior who is in meditative equipoise is aspirational bodhicitta.

These are a few things to think about. I said that I remembered reading this text that says the initial mind generation that arises is the aspirational mind generation or aspirational bodhicitta. But it is also said that one enters the Mahayana path with the realisation of calm-abiding. Having said that, the question then arises: Is bodhicitta achieved while one is in meditative equipoise? If so, does that not make the initial bodhicitta aspirational?

Khen Rinpoche: I am not making any conclusions here. I am just throwing up the idea. I am not saying this is right. It is open for you to find out more.

Interpreted by Ven. Tenzin Gyurme; transcribed by Phuah Soon Ek, Vivien Ng and Aki Yeo; edited by Cecilia Tsong.