

The Urban Well

The Mercy Seminar 2022, Term 2.1

Opening Comments

Welcome to all of you to Term 2 of the Mercy Seminar, in which we will be studying the understanding of mercy and compassion in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, by means of a meditative and contemplative reading of one of the central texts of that tradition, the *Bodhicaryavatara* (Entering the Path of Awakening) by Santideva, which was also entitled the *Bodhisattvacaryavatara* (Entering the Path of the Bodhisattva). Our goal is to enrich our own understanding of wisdom, mercy and compassion by examining the way Mahayana Buddhists look at these virtues. This is especially interesting in that Buddhists do not believe that there is a single God who is the Creator, Lord, Judge, and Redeemer of all creation. Instead, the universe is understood to be an endless cycle of birth, old age, suffering and death, with endless lives before this one, and endless lives after this, all governed by the consequences of volitional action or *karma*. This realm is called *samsara*, and it is the goal of Buddhists to escape *samsara*. Hence they understand wisdom and compassion without turning first to the wisdom and compassion of God.

All Buddhist traditions go back to what is considered to be the first teaching of the Buddha after he attained enlightenment or awakening, which he gave to five of his followers in the Deer Park around 500 CE. At the center of the Buddha's teaching or *Dharma* are the Four Noble Truths:

1. The Noble Truth of Suffering (*dukkha*).
2. The Noble Truth of the origin of suffering (*tanha*, or craving, hatred, and illusion).
3. The Noble Truth of the cessation of suffering (detachment).
4. The Noble Eightfold Path leading to the cessation of suffering.

The Mahayana tradition will accept these four noble truths, but it will differ on the path to the cessation of suffering, and one version of the Mahayana path will be the *Bodhicaryavatara* which we will read together.

All Buddhist traditions also accept the Triple Refuge that all Buddhists take to free themselves from suffering (*dukkha*), as it is the taking of this Triple Refuge that makes one a Buddhist:

1. I take refuge in the Buddha.
2. I take refuge in the *Dharma* (the truth the Buddha taught).

3. I take refuge in the *Sangha* (the community of monks that live out the teachings of the Buddha to free themselves from suffering).

We see this at the beginning passage of our reading tonight: “I make obeisance to the Sughatas (Buddhas) and their sons, and to their bodies of Dharma, and to all those worthy of praise.” We also see it at the beginning of the second chapter: “That I may fully grasp that jewel, the Mind, I worship here the Thatagatas, and the flawless jewel, the true Dharma, and the sons of the Buddha, who are oceans of virtue.”

In the Theravada Buddhist tradition which we studied in Term 1, and which is still observed in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar/Burma, and Cambodia, we saw that the follower of the Buddha’s *Dhamma* forsakes the household and becomes a *bhikkhu*, an ascetic who may or may not belong to a monastic community or *Sangha*. The aspiration of the *bhikkhu* is to become an *Arhant*, one who has freed himself from illusion, craving, and hatred, and hence from suffering in the realm of *samsara*. By freeing themselves of clinging, hatred, and illusion, the *Arhants* become capable of universal love and compassion toward all living beings, and experience true joy and happiness. We see this especially in the Theravada Buddhist scripture, the *Metta-sutta* on universal love.

However, there were other Buddhists who thought that the ideals of the *bhikkhu* and *Arhant* did not fully embody the teaching and example of the Buddha. After all, when the Buddha attained enlightenment, he did not retire from the world, but spent the next 45 years teaching and living the *Dharma* not only in the forests and mountains, but also in towns and markets. *Arhants* were seen to have stopped their progress on the path of the *Dharma*, in a way that was seen as selfish. Mahayana Buddhists claim that becoming an *Arhant* is necessary, but it is not sufficient, for it is lacking in the compassion that was exhibited in the Buddha, who saw the suffering of all sentient beings and did all he could to alleviate it.

Hence, for Mahayana Buddhists, the ideal is no longer to *Arhant*, for that is a stage along the way. The ideal is rather to become a Buddha oneself, and the way to become a Buddha is to become a *bodhisattva*. In the Theravada Buddhist tradition, a *bodhisattva* is one of the Buddha’s previous lives, as told in *The Jataka Tales*. For the Mahayana tradition, every Buddhist should seek to become a *bodhisattva*, who responds with wisdom and compassion to the suffering of the universe, and who vows to free all creatures from suffering by taking refuge in the Buddha, the *Dharma*, and the community of *bodhisattvas*. We see this in II.26 in tonight’s reading: “As far as the seat of the Awakening, I go to the Buddha for refuge; I go for refuge to the Dharma, and to the assembly of Bodhisattvas.” The assembly of the *bodhisattvas* replaces the *Sangha* as the third jewel of refuge. The *bodhisattva* seeks enlightenment not to free him or herself from suffering, but to free all sentient beings from suffering, and to use the most skillful means to do so, by means of the acquisition and distribution of merit. As Santideva says in the last chapter of the *Bodhicaryavatara*: “As long as space abides and as long as the world abides, so long may I abide, destroying the sufferings of the world” (X.55). This is the most

beloved text of the current leader of the Tibetan Buddhist community, the Dalai Lama, who is considered to be a *bodhisattva* himself. Mahayana Buddhists see the universe as populated by many *bodhisattvas*, many of whom are named in the text we are reading, especially Avalokiteshvara (“Lord who looks down in compassion”), Manjusri (“Pleasing Splendor,” representing Wisdom), and Maitreya, who is destined to be the next Buddha in our realm to teach the *Dharma* anew.

Instead of the Noble Eightfold Path followed by Theravada Buddhists, Mahayana Buddhists follow the six perfections (*paramitas*): generosity, morality, patience, vigor, meditation, and wisdom; to which has been added: skill in means, conviction, strength, and knowledge. The Mahayana tradition spread from north India first to China and Tibet, and then to Korea, Japan, and Vietnam, where it remains the dominant Buddhist tradition in those lands. Thich Nhat Hahn was a very influential Mahayana teacher in the Zen tradition who just died in January, and whose books you may have encountered.

The book we are reading this term describes the path the bodhisattva takes to acquire the wisdom (*prajna*) and compassion (*karuna*) needed to seek to free the universe from suffering. It was written by a Buddhist monk in north India around 700 CE, in the monastic university of Nalanda, which was destroyed 400 years later by the Muslims. We know that many pilgrims from China came to study there, and Santideva’s text was translated into Tibetan and has been used by Tibetan Buddhists ever since. It is not the only book describing the way of acquiring the awakened mind (*bodhicitta*) of the *bodhisattva*, but it is one of the most influential of that genre, and it is considered to be the most beautiful, as it was rendered in Sanskrit verse. It also gives us an insight into the liturgical life of the monastery, in the section on Supreme Worship which occurs in chapters 2 and 3. This act of Supreme Worship is followed by Santideva’s confession of the evil he has done, which gives us a powerful sense of the urgency he wants to inspire in the reader, echoing his exhortation at the beginning of the text: “4 This opportune moment is extremely hard to meet. Once met, it yields the welfare of mankind. If the advantage is neglected now, how will this meeting come again?” We do not know when we will die, so we should take advantage of our birth as human beings who have heard the Dharma to resolve now to attain an awakened mind in order to free all creatures from suffering.