

The Urban Well

The Mercy Seminar 2022, Term 2.2

Opening Comments

Thus far we have read four chapters of the *Bodhicaryavatara*, which all deal with the acquisition of the Awakened Mind. The first chapter consists of praise for the awakened mind, and reminds us how rare it is for one to arise in the world.

I.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? 5 At night in darkness thick with clouds a lightning flash gives a moment's brightness. So, sometime, by the power of the Buddha, the mind of the world might for a moment turn to acts of merit.

Since the realm of cyclical existence, called *samsara*, is a realm of profound suffering, the Awakened Mind is primarily praised as being the means by which we transcend the realm of endless suffering. "I.8. Those who long to transcend the hundreds of miseries of existence, who long to relieve creatures of their sorrows, who long to enjoy many hundreds of joys, must never abandon the Awakening Mind." But note the direction of the Awakened Mind—it knows that it is the way to transcend suffering and death, but it pursues this goal in order to free all other embodied creatures from their suffering and death. We saw this idea in the *Lectio Divina* from last week:

I.21 Immeasurable merit took hold of the well-intentioned person who thought 'Let me dispel the headaches of beings'. 22 What then of the person who longs to remove the unequalled agony of every single being and make their virtue infinite?

This is why the Awakened Mind is to be praised: it knows the path of deliverance out of suffering and death, and it pursues this path to free all creatures, human and other, from their own suffering.

I.32 People honour someone who gives alms to a few people, saying, 'He does good', because he contemptuously supports their life for half a day with a moment's gift of mere food. 33 What then of the one who offers to a limitless number of beings, throughout limitless time, the fulfilment of all desires, unending until the end of the sky and those beings?

The first chapter also introduces a distinction within the Awakening Mind that we will have to keep in mind as we read this text.

I.15 The Awakening Mind should be understood to be of two kinds; in brief: the Mind resolved on Awakening and the Mind proceeding towards Awakening. 16 The distinction between these two should be understood by the wise in the same way as the distinction is recognized between a person who desires to go and one who is going, in that order.

In the second chapter, we become aware of the difficulty of resolving to adopt the Awakening Mind, due to the author's utter lack of merit. This turns him outside of himself to take refuge in the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas who have attained the Awakened Mind that leads them to seek to alleviate the suffering of all creatures, including Santideva.

II.7 I have no merit, I am completely destitute. I have nothing else to offer in worship. So, through their power, may the Lords resolved on the well-being of others accept this for my well-being. 8 I give my entire self wholly to the Conquerors and to their sons. Take possession of me, sublime beings; out of devotion, I am your slave.

This picks up on the theme of worship or devotion that we examined in detail last week, and it intensifies this theme by means of its language of complete surrender to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. But note that he does so in order that he might attain the courage to leave all evil behind by means of his own adoption of the Awakened Mind. "II.9 You take possession of me. I become fearless. I act for the benefit of beings. I leave behind previous wrongdoing completely; never again shall I do another wrong." This leads to the prolonged ceremony of worship we noted last week, culminating again in taking refuge in the Buddhas, the Dharma, and the Bodhisattvas.

II. 24 With as many prostrations as there are atoms in all the Buddha-fields, I throw myself down before the Buddhas of all three times, before the Dharma, and before the highest assembly. 25 I worship all caityas [bodily relics] and places associated with the Bodhisattva. I bow down to my teachers, and to spiritual aspirants who are worthy of praise. 26 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.

Once again, however, Santideva becomes aware of his own evil, in comparison with the boundless wisdom and compassion of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in whom he takes refuge. And he is aware that he alone is responsible for the evil he has done, and he alone must remove that evil by what he does.

II.62 Leaving behind this world of the living, along with relatives and intimates, wherever I go I shall go alone. What to me are all those I love or loathe? 63 Rather, at all times night and day, my sole concern should be this: suffering is the inevitable result of wrong. How can I escape it? 64 Whatever evil I, a deluded fool, have amassed, what is wrong by nature and what is wrong by convention, 65 See, I confess all that as I stand before the Protectors, my palms together in

reverence, terrified of suffering, prostrating myself again and again. 66 Let the Leaders accept my transgression for what it is. It is not good, O Protectors. I must not do it again.

This sets the context for the two chapters we are examining this evening, which concern the adopting of the Awakened Mind, and the vigilance required of him once it has been adopted. Chapter three may be seen as a sustained vow by which Santideva promises to attain an Awakened Mind for the welfare and deliverance of all suffering creatures. “III.6 With the good acquired by doing all this as described, may I allay all the suffering of every living being.” At the heart of the Awakened Mind is self-abandoning compassion, which gives up everything for the deliverance of others. “III.11 Abandonment of all is Enlightenment and Enlightenment is my heart’s goal. If I must give up everything, better it be given to sentient beings.” He sees himself as following in the path of previous Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, which means that it is not enough to take refuge in the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas: one must resolve to become a Bodhisattva oneself, even if one needs their assistance to do so.

III.22 In the same way as bygone Sugatas took up the Awakening Mind, in the same way as they progressed in the Bodhisattva training, 23 So too, I myself shall generate the Awakening Mind for the welfare of the world; and just so shall I train in those precepts in due order.

This leads to a series of exhortations intended to fortify his resolve to take up the Awakened Mind, describing the ways the Awakened Mind benefits the suffering cosmos, culminating in what may be taken to be his vow to become a Bodhisattva: “III.33 ‘Today I summon the world to Buddhahood and to worldly happiness meanwhile. In the presence of all the Saviours, may gods, titans, and all rejoice.’”

The fourth chapter addresses the need to be vigilant in keeping the resolve to adopt the Awakened Mind, and the dangers of failing to keep one’s vow to act for the deliverance of all suffering creatures. This echoes the last words the Buddha spoke to his followers before he died: “Strive to be vigilant!” Santideva returns to the idea he raised at the beginning of the first chapter, regarding the astonishingly rare opportunity provided by being born a human being who is exposed to the Dharma of the Buddha:

IV.15 ‘When shall I find such rare circumstances again: the arising of a Tathāgata, faith, the human state itself, the capacity to practice skillful deeds, 16 Health, and this day, with food and freedom from disaster:’ In a moment life breaks its word. The body is like an object on loan. 17 The human state is never achieved again by such acts as mine. When the human state is lost there is only evil. How could there be good?

This encourages him to be vigilant in holding fast to his resolution to adopt the Awakened Mind, since “IV.23 There is no greater waste of time than this, nor is there greater folly: that after attaining such a fleeting opportunity I do not practice skillful deeds.”

However, once again Santideva confronts the evil that still remains within himself, and the defilements that still hold him captive and drag him back into the evil life he swore he would forever leave behind.

IV.26 Though I have somehow come to a high unattainable place of advantage, and though I understand this, still I am led back to those selfsame hells once more. 27 I have no will in this matter, as if bewildered by spells. I do not understand. By what am I perplexed? Who dwells here within me? 28 Enemies such as greed and hate lack hands and feet and other limbs. They are not brave, nor are they wise. How is it they enslave me?

The realism of Santideva regarding the difficulty of eliminating all evil and defilement from himself is quite striking. He even suggests that his vow to adopt the Awakened Mind for the deliverance of all suffering creatures took place in a moment of intoxication, even though it is now binding. “IV.42 At that time I was intoxicated, speaking without realizing my own limitations. After that I can never turn back from destroying the defilements.” The paradox is that the person who vowed to deliver the universe from the defilements of ignorance, craving, and hatred nonetheless finds those defilements very much within himself. “IV.41 I have promised to liberate the universe from the defilements, to the limit of space in the ten directions, but even my own self is not freed from the defilements!”

There can be no turning back, however, and therefore no excuses. The Buddha has diagnosed the human condition in his Dharma: Life is dukkha, suffering, disease. He has also prescribed the cure, in the adopting of the Awakened Mind by becoming a bodhisattva. “IV.48 Making a firm resolve in this way, I shall strive to follow the training as it has been taught. How can someone who could be cured by medicine get well if he does not follow the doctor’s advice?” All the evils are rooted in Santideva’s mind, and therefore it is only his adoption of the Awakened Mind that can drive them out, by means of the wisdom that drives out ignorance.

IV.47 The defilements do not dwell in objects, nor in the collection of the senses, nor in the space in between. There is nowhere else for them to dwell, and yet they churn up the entire universe. This is but illusion! So, heart, free yourself from fear, devote yourself to striving for wisdom. Why, quite needlessly, do you torment yourself in hells?

This takes us all the way back to the beginning of the *Bodhicaryavatara*: “I.8. Those who long to transcend the hundreds of miseries of existence, who long to relieve creatures of their sorrows, who long to enjoy many hundreds of joys, must never abandon the Awakening Mind.”