

The Urban Well

The Mercy Seminar 2026, Term I.5

Opening Comments

Last week, we looked at selections from the *Dhammapada*, which is representative of the sayings of the Buddha preserved in the Theravada Buddhist tradition. The goal of the path of the Buddha as understood in the *Dhammapada* is the overcoming of suffering, of *dukkha*, by extinguishing the craving or thirst that gives rise to suffering, and that leads to disease, old age, death and rebirth. One who succeeds in extinguishing thirst (*tanha*) is called an Arhant, an enlightened one, and one who has attained *Nibbana* is not reborn again, but experiences ease (*sukkah*) or happiness.

The one who has arrived at (spiritual) perfection, who is devoid of fear, free from craving, and without (moral) blemish, (that person) has wrenched out the darts of (mundane) existence. This is the last body (he will wear). If one speaks or acts with a pure mind, happiness [*sukkah*] follows like a shadow that never departs.

This is the goal to be attained by taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. Without the teaching of the Buddha, especially the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path, the path to *Nibbana* would not be known. But the monks, or *bhikkus*, who pursue this path in the Sangha can hope to attain this goal.

As the Buddhist tradition rapidly developed and expanded in north India and beyond, a school of thought emerged which came to see this goal of personal enlightenment as not fully reflecting the life and teaching of the Buddha. In particular, the ideal of the enlightenment of the Arhant does not reflect the infinite compassion that the Buddha had not only for all suffering humans, but for all creatures of any kind who are capable of suffering. These Buddhists claimed that the Arhant ideal was a lesser path, which they called Hinayana, over against the greater path, which they called Mahayana. The greater path would not only involve following the path that the Buddha taught, but to follow the path that the Buddha took. After all, the Buddha spoke of his previous lives as a *bodhisattva*, one pursuing Buddhahood, and when he attained enlightenment, he did not retire from the world to enjoy the happiness and freedom from suffering for himself, but rather spent the next forty-five years teaching throughout northern India, in cities and in forests, in a way which was remarkably skillful, as he was able to accommodate his teaching to the capacity and spiritual development of his listeners. Accordingly, followers of the Mahayana school took upon themselves the vow to become *bodhisattvas*, so that they could eventually become Buddhas themselves, in order to extinguish the suffering of all sentient beings throughout the universe. They called this path the *bodhisattvayana*, the way of the *bodhisattva*, and the goal was to

attain infinite wisdom (*prajna*) and infinite compassion (*karuna*). They insisted that the more wisdom one attains, the more compassion one acquires. To claim to have wisdom without compassion is false, as is to claim to have compassion without wisdom. The way of the *bodhisattva* does not include following the Noble Eightfold Path, but rather pursuing the six perfections, or *paramitas*: generosity, morality, patience, vigor, meditation, and wisdom.

According to Mahayana Buddhists, there are many Buddhas at work throughout the cosmos, as well as many *bodhisattvas*, all of whom work for the dissemination of wisdom and the alleviation of suffering. One can trust their omniscience, power, and assistance as one considers pursuing the path of the *bodhisattva*, as we can see in the opening section of the reading tonight. However, the goal of such worship is not to have other Buddhas or *bodhisattvas* save us, but rather to have their presence inspire us to pursue for ourselves the same perfections we see in them. Thus, Mahayana Buddhists set before us a paradoxical picture. On the one hand, Buddhas are incomparably great in their power and omniscience. On the other hand, everyone has the capacity to become a Buddha, due to their Buddha-nature. The Mahayana school spread from north India to China, and from there to Vietnam, Korea, and Japan.

As I have mentioned, the *bodhisattva* ideal is central to Mahayana Buddhists. This ideal only appears in the Theravada tradition in the Jataka Tales, which narrate the Buddha's past lives. But the Mahayana Buddhists take the Buddha's past lives as the ideal all should pursue, over against the Arhant ideal, which they came to see as selfish, or better, as not being sufficiently selfless and compassionate. Mahayana Buddhists think that we should seek to attain wisdom and compassion not only to free ourselves from suffering, but to free all sentient beings from suffering. They focus on several *bodhisattvas* in particular, as we can see in tonight's reading, especially Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva of infinite compassion, and Manjusri, the bodhisattva of infinite wisdom, as well as Maitreya, who will come in the future as a Buddha to teach the Dharma anew, once it has been forgotten.

The work from which we are reading for this week and next is the *Bodhicaryavatara*, or Entering the Path of the Awakening Mind. The author is Shantideva, who lived from 685-763 CE, and who was a Mahayana Buddhist monk at the great monastic university at Nalanda, in northern India. We know next to nothing about him other than what he tells us about himself in our reading. He wrote this work in his own voice, and apparently for his own benefit. As he tells us, "2 Nothing new will be said here, nor have I any skill in composition. Therefore I do not imagine that I can benefit others. I have done this to perfume my own mind." However, he does express the hope that others might benefit from his reflections, and this has definitely happened, as this work has been highly influential not only during his time, but right up to the present, especially in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Indeed, one of the phrases of our Lectio Divina tonight is the favorite verse of Buddhist teaching for the Dalai Lama: "As long as space abides and as long as the world abides, so long may I abide, destroying the sufferings of the world."

As we saw in the *Dhammapada*, Shantideva realizes what a rare opportunity it is to be born as a human being at a time in *samsara* when the Dharma of the Buddha is being taught. This gives his text a clear sense of heightened urgency. “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?” This is especially true given the fact that the Awakening Mind has arisen in Shantideva, likely due to the power of the Buddha. “9 When the Awakening Mind has arisen in him, a wretch, captive in the prison of existence, he is straightaway hailed son of the Sugatas, to be revered in the worlds of gods and men.” However, once the Awakening Mind has emerged, it must be pursued and developed on the path to enlightenment, which is the way of the *bodhisattva*. As Shantideva says,

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. 17 Even in cyclic existence great fruit comes from the Mind resolved on Awakening, but nothing like the uninterrupted merit that comes from that resolve when put into action. 18 From the moment that he takes on that Mind to release the limitless realm of beings, with a resolve that cannot be turned back, Praise of the Awakening Mind. 19 From that moment on, though he may close off or be distracted many times, uninterrupted streams of merit like the bursting sky continuously pour forth.

Pursuing the path of the Awakening Mind is pursuing the path of the infinite wisdom and compassion of the *bodhisattva*, by which one vows to alleviate the suffering of every sentient being. “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?”

Shantideva then takes refuge in the Triple Jewel, the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha, though in his Mahayana version this triple refuge sounds more glorious: “1 That I may fully grasp that jewel, the Mind, I worship here the Tathāgatas, and the flawless jewel, the true Dharma, and the sons of the Buddhas, who are oceans of virtue.” Instead of the Buddha there are multiple Tathagatas, and instead of the sangha of *bhikkus* there is the community of *bodhisattvas*. Indeed, by taking refuge in the fellowship of the *bodhisattvas*, Shantideva hopes to become their instrument in alleviating the suffering of the world.

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. 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.

Reinforcing his lack of merit, Shantideva repeats the triple refuge, and then confesses the wrongs that he has done, which creates anxiety in him that he may not have time to undo these wrongs by the acquisition of his own merit. “31 The cruel evil I have wickedly done, corrupted by many faults; O Leaders, I confess it all. 32 How can I escape it? I am continually in a state of alarm, O Leaders. Let death not come too soon to me, before my mass of evil is destroyed!” From this point on in tonight’s reading, Shantideva awakens in himself, and in his readers, alarm at the shortness of life, and the swiftness with which death can unexpectedly appear, bringing to a halt his recently undertaken quest for the Awakening Mind, and leading him to an evil rebirth due to the evil he has thoughtlessly done.

36 Those I loathe will die; those I love will die; I too will die; and all will die. 37 Everything experienced fades to memory. Everything is like an image in a dream. It is gone and is not seen again. 38 Even in this life, as I have stood by, many loved and loathed have gone. But the evil occasioned by them remains, ghastly, before me. 39 Just like them I am a fleeting wraith. This I failed to recognize. In delusion, yearning, and aversion, I did evil many times. 40 Night and day, without respite, more of life is lost. It never gets longer. Surely, will I not die? 41 Though here laid on my bed, though in the midst of family, it is alone that I must endure the agony of the throes of death. 42 For one seized by the messengers of Death, what good is a relative, what good a friend? At that time, merit alone is a defense, and I have not acquired it. 43 By clinging to this transient life, not recognizing this danger, heedless, O Lords, I have acquired great evil.

The approaching horizon of death serves to give much greater depth and urgency to the need to take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, for these are the only things in which he can trust in light of the inevitable approach of his own death. “48 Right now I go for refuge to the mighty Protectors of the world, who have undertaken the care of the world, the Conquerors who remove all fear. 49 I also go whole-heartedly for refuge to the Dharma they have realized, which destroys the danger of cyclic existence, and to the assembly of Bodhisattvas.” On the one hand, Shantideva hopes that the compassion of the *bodhisattvas* in whom he takes refuge will forestall the threat of death so that he can pursue the path of the Awakening Mind. “54 I have transgressed your command. Now, at seeing the danger, terrified, I go to you for refuge. Destroy the danger, quickly!” On the other hand, being in the presence of the *bodhisattvas*, in light of the inevitable approach of death, leads Shantideva to confess his wrongdoing once more.

60 Who has granted me impunity? How shall I escape? It is certain I shall die. How can my mind be at ease? 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.