

The Urban Well

The Mercy Seminar 2026, Term I.6

Opening Comments

In answer to a question from last time, *Vajryana* or “lightening thunder-bolt vehicle” is a Mahayana school that developed in Northern India in the century after Shantideva, and spread to Tibet soon after. It is often referred to by the name Tantric Buddhism, because of its writings, called *tantras*. It claims to provide a method by which to attain *nirvana* in this life, under the direct tutelage of a saint or *siddha*, who is one who has attained enlightenment. This tradition, which is too complex to go into tonight, is represented in our time by the Dalai Lama, who is seen by Tibetan Buddhists as the reincarnation of Avalokiteshvara, the *bodhisattva* of infinite compassion. As I mentioned before, Shantideva’s work is studied and practiced in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, along with *Vajrayana*, and one of the passages from the *Bodhicaryavatara* is the Dalai Lama’s favorite *bodhisattva* vow. “As long as space abides and as long as the world abides, so long may I abide, destroying the sufferings of the world.”

Each of the chapters of Shantideva’s *Bodhicaryavatara* traces the path of the future *bodhisattva* through the six perfections or *paramitas*: generosity, morality, patience, vigor, meditation, and wisdom. Meditation is the primary tool Buddhists use to develop insight into the way things really are, another word for which is awakening or enlightenment, following the example and teaching of the Buddha, who meditated for six years before attaining awakening.

There are two types of meditation in the Buddhist tradition that need to be distinguished, even though they are used together, as we see in tonight’s reading. The two types are *samatha* meditation and *vipasyana* meditation. The Buddha inherited the practice of *samatha* meditation from his Hindu contemporaries and found it to be invaluable in calming the mind and eliminating distracting thoughts. We see this type of meditation represented in the opening verse of tonight’s reading: “Increasing one’s endeavour in this way, one should stabilize the mind in meditative concentration, since a person whose mind is distracted stands between the fangs of the defilements.” The Sanskrit term for “meditative concentration” is *samadhi*, which could be translated as “one-pointed meditation,” meaning that the mind is focused on one thing and is not distracted by anything else. This state is the second of four stages or *dhyanas* of *samatha* meditation. We see the importance of this level of meditation in tonight’s reading: “Freed from all other concerns, my own mind in a state of single-pointed thought, I shall apply myself to taming and increasing the meditative concentration of my mind.” There are two *dhyanas* above this level, however: equanimity and calm happiness, and pure mindfulness unperturbed by happiness or sorrow. The Buddha was aware that the depth of peace and tranquility attained in the highest two levels of *samatha* meditation could lead the monk to seek these levels as an end in

themselves, but these two forms of meditative concentration do not lead one to “see things as they really are,” as they do not focus on dependent origination and the three truths of reality: that it is impermanent, without self or soul, and subject to suffering. The mind is only truly awakened when it sees these truths in all reality.

This is why the Buddha added another type of meditation to *samadhi* meditation, namely, *vipasyana*. This type of meditation is directly informed by the *Dharma*, and has as its goal attaining deep, clear, and personal awareness of “the way things really are.” Hence it is this type of meditation, in conjunction with the first two *dhyanas* of *samatha* meditation, that leads to the Awakening Mind. We see this combination in the opening of tonight’s reading: “Realizing that one well-attuned to insight through tranquility can destroy the defilements, one should firstly seek tranquility, and that by disregarding one’s delight in the world.” This form of meditation begins with being conscious of our breathing and the various states and positions of the body, along with an analysis of the parts that make up the body, to show that there is no soul or self there; and it culminates with “cemetery contemplation,” where the person meditates on a decomposing corpse. We see reference to this type of *vipasyana* meditation in tonight’s reading:

30 When shall I go to the local charnel ground and compare my own rotting body with other corpses? 31 For this body of mine will also turn putrid in that way, its stench so vile even the jackals will not slink near. 32 Even the bits of bone born together in this single body will be scattered apart; how much more so other people one holds dear? 33 Man is born alone and alone he dies. No one else shares his agony. What help are those one loves, creators of obstacles? 34 As one travelling a road takes lodging on his way, so too one on the path of existence takes lodging in each birth. 35 Before four men bear him out from there with the world lamenting him, he should go forth to the forest.

The goal of this type of meditation is to attain insight into the impermanence of all life, which all ends in death, so that one dies to the world before one actually dies; for only in this way can we lose our fear of death and bring our craving for existence to an end. “Free from acquaintance, free from conflict, he is quite alone in his body. Having already died to the world, he does not grieve as he dies.”

We see in this section the way Shantideva combines the single-mindedness of the second *dhyana* of *samatha* meditation, *samadhi*, with the insight gained by *vipasyana* meditation, which focuses on those elements of the *Dharma* which lead the future *bodhisattva* to seek the good of others, even if it means suffering for himself. “By developing the virtues of solitude in such forms as these, distracted thoughts being calmed, one should now develop the Awakening Mind. At first one should meditate intently on the equality of oneself and others as follows: ‘All equally experience suffering and happiness. I should look after them as I do myself.’” Notice how the forms of meditation he pursues in the latter part of the reading are not just mindfulness leading to tranquility, but are rather meditations on subjects that lead to the development of selfless compassion, which is the driving force of the *bodhisattva*. “Whoever longs

to rescue quickly both himself and others should practice the supreme mystery: exchange of self and other.” We should seek to alleviate the suffering of others even if it means that we ourselves must voluntarily suffer in order to do so. “You may argue: compassion causes us so much suffering, why force it to arise? Yet when one sees how much the world suffers, how can this suffering from compassion be considered great? If the suffering of one ends the suffering of many, then one who has compassion for others and himself must cause that suffering to arise.” The greatest suffering in the Buddhist worldview is Avici hell, which is not a place of eternal torment, as in the Christian view of hell, but it is the realm of the greatest suffering creatures can know, even if they can also be liberated from there. To free creatures suffering in Avici hell, the *bodhisattva* should gladly descend down to those depths. “Those who have developed the continuum of their mind in this way, to whom the suffering of others is as important as the things they themselves hold dear, plunge down into the Avici hell as geese into a cluster of lotus blossoms.” The *bodhisattva* Avalokitesvara is said to have done just this in order to liberate those suffering in Avici hell. And as we have seen, the driving engine of all suffering is the way I cling to the sense of myself, thinking that there actually is a self to which I should cling. In order to free myself from suffering, I need to eradicate that clinging in myself, and turn my attention from clinging to compassion, so that I seek the good of others as I once sought it only for myself.

134 The calamities which happen in the world, the sufferings and fears, many as they are, they all result from clinging onto the notion of self, so what good is this clinging of mine? 135 If one does not let go of self, one cannot let go of suffering, as one who does not let go of fire cannot let go of burning. 136 Therefore, in order to allay my own suffering and to allay the suffering of others, I devote myself to others and accept them as myself. 137 Hey Mind, make the resolve, ‘I am bound to others’! From now on you must have no other concern than the welfare of all beings.

The paradox of the way of the *bodhisattva* is that in order to attain to the proper meditative state of mind—the Awakening Mind—the *bodhisattva* in training needs to live in solitude, away from the company of people, including other monks, which would likely take place after the monk had trained for years under the tutelage of a master in the monastery. “Therefore I shall always follow the solitary life, which is delightful and free from strife, leading to the auspicious, and calming all distractions.” On the other hand, one should practice various forms of meditation in that solitude which lead one no longer to seek one’s good at all, but only the good and happiness of all other suffering creatures. “In fact, though acting for the good of others, there is neither intoxication nor dismay, nor desire for the resulting reward, with a thirst solely for the well-being of others.”

I look forward to discussing these ideas further with you this evening, along with other topics you have found to be of interest in the reading.