



# NO TIME TO LOSE

A TIMELY GUIDE TO THE WAY OF THE BODHISATTVA

PEMA CHÖDRÖN

*Author of *When Things Fall Apart**

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A Timely Guide to the  
Way of the Bodhisattva

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*Edited by Helen Berliner*



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*To my teacher,*

Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche,

*I bow down*

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# *People Like Us Can Make a Difference*

THE WAY OF THE BODHISATTVA was composed in India over twelve centuries ago, yet it remains remarkably relevant for our times. This classic text, written by the Indian sage Shantideva, gives surprisingly up-to-date instructions for people like you and me to live sanely and openheartedly, even in a very troubled world. It is the essential guidebook for fledgling *bodhisattvas*, those spiritual warriors who long to alleviate suffering, their own and that of others. Thus it belongs to the mahayana school of Buddhism that emphasizes all-inclusive compassion and the cultivation of our flexible, unbiased wisdom mind.

According to tradition, to write a commentary on a text such as *The Way of the Bodhisattva* (*Bodhicharyavatara* in Sanskrit), one must have advanced spiritual realization or have been directed in a dream to compose such a treatise. Since I unfortunately have neither qualification, I simply offer this teaching with the sincere aspiration that it may help new readers to benefit from Shantideva's teachings as much as I have.

My own appreciation of *The Way of the Bodhisattva* came about slowly, and only after I became familiar with Patrul Rinpoche, the great wandering yogi of nineteenth-century Tibet. From his writings and the outrageous stories told about him, I came to respect and love this man dearly. He had no fixed abode, no belongings, and was very unconventional and spontaneous in his behavior. Yet he was a powerful and very wise teacher, whose spiritual realization manifested in all the situations of his life. He related to people with great compassion and tenderness, but also with ruthless honesty.

When I discovered that Patrul Rinpoche had taught this text hundreds of times, it caught my attention. He would wander around Tibet teaching anyone who would listen: rich and poor, nomads and aristocrats, scholars and people who had never studied the Buddhist teachings. Hearing this, I thought, "If this eccentric man, this dedicated yogi, loved the text so much, there must be something to it." So I began to study it in earnest.

Some people fall in love with *The Way of the Bodhisattva* the first time they read it, but I wasn't one of them. Truthfully, without my admiration for Patrul Rinpoche, I wouldn't have pursued it. Yet once I actually started grappling with its content, the text shook me out of a deep-seated complacency and I came to appreciate the urgency and relevance of these teachings. With Shantideva's guidance, I realized that ordinary people like us can make a difference in a world desperately in need of help.

I also began to wish for a less scholarly commentary than those available, one that might reach a wide audience and be accessible even to people who know nothing of the Buddhist teachings.

For these reasons, when I was requested to teach *The Way of the Bodhisattva* at Gampo Abbey monastic college, I was eager to give it a try. The transcripts of those talks form the basis of this book. My commentary on Shantideva's teaching is very much a student's view and a work in progress. Unquestionably, with the help of my teachers, my understanding of these verses will deepen considerably over time; nevertheless, I am truly delighted to share my enthusiasm for Shantideva's instructions.

Shantideva was born a prince in eighth-century India and, as the eldest son, was destined to inherit the throne. In one account of the story, the night before his coronation, Shantideva had a dream in which Manjushri (the bodhisattva of wisdom) appeared to him and told him to renounce worldly life and seek ultimate truth. Thus Shantideva left home immediately, giving up the throne for the spiritual path, just as the historical Buddha had done.

In another version, the night before his enthronement, Shantideva's mother gave him a ceremonial bath using scalding water. When he asked why she was intentionally burning him, she replied, "So this pain is nothing compared to the pain you will suffer when you're king," and on that very night, she rapidly departed.

Whatever the catalyst, Shantideva disappeared into India and began living the life of a renunciate. Eventually he arrived at Nalanda University, which was the largest, most powerful monastery in India at the time, a place of great learning that attracted students from all over the Buddhist world. At Nalanda he was ordained a monk and given the name Shantideva, which translates as "God of Peace."

Contrary to what his later reputation suggests, Shantideva was not well liked at Nalanda. Apparently he was one of those people who didn't show up for anything, never studying or coming to practice sessions. His fellow monks said that his three "realizations" were eating, sleeping, and shitting. Finally, in order to teach him a lesson, they invited him to give a talk to the entire university. Only the best students were accorded such an honor. You had to sit on a throne and, of course, have something to say. Since Shantideva was presumed to know nothing, the monks thought he would be shamed and humiliated into leaving the university. That's one story.

Another version presents a more sympathetic view of Nalanda, whereby the monks hoped that by embarrassing Shantideva, they could motivate him to study. Nevertheless, like all sentient beings who are building a case against someone, they probably derived a certain joy from the possibility of making Shantideva squirm. It's said they tried to further humiliate him by making the throne unusually high, without providing any stairs.

To their astonishment, Shantideva had no problem getting onto the throne. He then confidently asked the assembled monks if they wanted traditional teachings or something they had never heard before. When they replied that they wanted to hear something new, he proceeded to deliver the entire *Bodhicharyavatara*, or *The Way of the Bodhisattva*.

Not only were these teachings very personal, full of useful advice, and relevant to their lives, they were also poetic and fresh. The content itself was not radical. In the very first verses, Shantideva says that everything he's about to teach derives from the lineage of the Buddha. It wasn't his subject matter that was original; it was the direct and very contemporary way he expressed the teachings, and the beauty and power of his words.

Toward the end of his presentation, Shantideva began to teach on emptiness: the unconditioned, inexpressible, dreamlike nature of all experience. As he spoke, the teachings became more and more groundless. There was less and less to hold on to, and the monks' minds opened further and further. At that point, it is said that Shantideva began to float. He levitated upward until the monks could no longer see him and could only hear his voice. Perhaps this just expresses how enraptured his audience felt. We will never know for sure. What we do know is that after Shantideva's discourse on emptiness he disappeared. By then his disappearance probably disappointed the monks, but he never returned to Nalanda and remained a wandering yogi for the rest of his life.

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*The Way of the Bodhisattva* is divided into ten chapters. Patrul Rinpoche organized them into three main sections based on the following verse by the great Buddhist master Nagarjuna:

May bodhichitta, precious and sublime,  
Arise where it has not yet come to be;  
And where it has arisen may it not decline,  
But grow and flourish ever more and more.

The Sanskrit term *bodhichitta* is often translated as “awakened heart,” and refers to an intense desire to alleviate suffering. On the relative level, bodhichitta expresses itself as longing. Specifically, it is the heartfelt yearning to free oneself from the pain of ignorance and habitual patterns in order to help others do the same. This longing to alleviate the suffering of others is the main point. We start close to home with the wish to help those we know and love, but the underlying inspiration is global and all encompassing. Bodhichitta is a sort of “mission impossible”: the desire to end the suffering of all beings, including those we’ll never meet, as well as those we loathe.

On the absolute level, bodhichitta is nondual wisdom, the vast, unbiased essence of mind. More importantly, this is your mind—yours and mine. It may seem distant but it isn’t. In fact, Shantideva composed this text to remind himself that he could contact his wisdom mind and help it to flourish.

According to Patrul Rinpoche’s threefold division, the first three chapters of *The Way of the Bodhisattva* elucidate the opening lines of Nagarjuna’s verse—“May bodhichitta, precious and sublime / Arise where it has not yet come to be”—and refer to our initial longing to care for others. We yearn for this transformative quality to arise in ourselves, and in all beings, even those who have never before concerned themselves with the welfare of others. Chapter one offers a rhapsody on the wonders of bodhichitta. Chapter two prepares the mind to nurture this bodhichitta longing: as if preparing the soil, we prepare the mind so the seed of bodhichitta can grow. Chapter three introduces us to the bodhisattva’s vow, the commitment to use one’s life to help others.

Sadly, we’re usually so preoccupied with our own comfort and security that we don’t give much thought to what others might be going through. While justifying our own prejudice and anger, we feel and denounce these qualities in others. We don’t want ourselves or those we care about to suffer, yet we condone revenge on our foes. Seeing the disastrous results of this “me-first” thinking in the daily news, however, we might long for bodhichitta to arise in the hearts of men and women everywhere. Then, instead of seeking revenge, we’d want even our enemies to be at peace.

Martin Luther King Jr. exemplified this kind of longing. He knew that happiness depended on healing the *whole* situation. Taking sides—black or white, abusers or abused—only perpetuates the suffering. For me to be healed, everyone has to be healed.

The people who make a positive difference in this world have big hearts. Bodhichitta is very much awake in their minds. With the skillful means to communicate to large groups of people, they can bring about enormous change, even in those who never previously looked beyond their own needs. This is the subject of the first three chapters of *The Way of the Bodhisattva*: the initial dawning of the awakened heart.

The next line of Nagarjuna’s verse, “And where it has arisen, may it not decline,” corresponds to the next three chapters of *The Way of the Bodhisattva* and emphasizes the need to nurture bodhichitta. If we don’t encourage it, our yearning to alleviate suffering can become dormant. While it never disappears completely, the ability to love and empathize can definitely decline.

The same is true of insight. A mere glimpse of the openness of our mind might touch us deeply.

might inspire us to start reading books like this one and awaken a feeling of urgency to do something meaningful with our lives. But if we don't nurture this inspiration, it falters. Life takes over, and we forget we ever saw things from a wider perspective. Therefore, once we feel the longing for bodhichitta, we need to be told how to proceed.

In chapters 4, 5, and 6, Shantideva describes how to work skillfully with emotional reactivity and the wildness of our minds. These are essential instructions for freeing ourselves from self-absorption and the narrow-minded reference point that my teacher Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche called “the cocoon.”

In these chapters, we are also introduced to the six *paramitas*. These are six basic ways to go beyond the false security of habitual patterns and relax with the fundamental groundlessness and unpredictability of our lives. The word *paramita* literally means “going to the other shore,” going beyond the usual preconceptions that blind us to our immediate experience.

In chapter 5, Shantideva presents the *paramita* of discipline; in chapter 6, the *paramita* of patience. But this is not discipline and patience in the ordinary sense of restraint and forbearance; it's the discipline and patience that awaken our heart by dissolving deep-seated habits of negativity and selfishness.

Chapters 7, 8, and 9 illuminate the last line of Nagarjuna's verse and contain teachings that encourage bodhichitta to “grow and flourish ever more and more.” Chapter 7 discusses the *paramita* of enthusiasm; chapter 8, the *paramita* of meditation; and chapter 9, the wisdom of emptiness.

In this third section, Shantideva shows us how bodhichitta can become a way of life. With his support, we could eventually enter into even the most challenging situations without losing our insight or compassion. This, of course, is a gradual learning process and we may have some relapses. But as we make the journey from fear to fearlessness, Shantideva is always there with the wisdom and encouragement we need.

After some consideration, I have decided that commentary on the ninth chapter of *The Way of the Bodhisattva* requires a book in itself. While these teachings on the *paramita* of wisdom are important to Shantideva's overall presentation, they are far more daunting than the rest of the text. They present a philosophical debate between Shantideva's “Middle-Way” view of emptiness and the views of other Buddhist and non-Buddhist schools. Because of their complexity, I feel it would be best to present them separately and at a future time. For now, I refer you to the excellent explanation in the introduction to the Padmakara translation of the *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, and to His Holiness the Dalai Lama's book *Transcendent Wisdom*.

In the tenth and final chapter Shantideva—wholeheartedly and with great passion—dedicates the benefit of his teachings to all suffering beings, whoever and wherever they may be.

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I regard this text as an instruction manual for extending ourselves to others, a guidebook for compassionate action. We can read it to free ourselves from crippling habits and confusion. We can read it to encourage our wisdom and compassion to grow stronger. And we can read it with the motivation to share the benefit with everyone we meet.

This is the spirit: read *The Way of the Bodhisattva* with the intention of accepting and digesting what rings true. Not everything will inspire you. You might find the language challenging, and you might sometimes feel provoked or offended. But remember that Shantideva's unwavering intention is to encourage us. He never doubts that we have the strength and basic goodness to help others, and he tells us everything he has learned about how to do this. Then, of course, it's up to us to use the

information and make it real.

Personally, I am indebted to Shantideva for his determination to get this message across: people like you and me *can* transform our lives by awakening the longing of bodhichitta. And I am deeply grateful to him for expressing, unrelentingly, that it is urgent, very urgent, that we do so. We have no time to lose. When I look at the state of the world today, I know his message could not possibly be more timely.

And now as long as space endures,  
As long as there are beings to be found,  
May I continue likewise to remain  
To drive away the sorrows of the world.  
—*The Way of the Bodhisattva*, v. 10.55

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# Developing a Clear Intention

## *The Excellence of Bodhichitta*

THE FIRST CHAPTER of the *Bodhicharyavatara* is an extended praise of bodhichitta. Shantideva starts on a positive note: we can connect with the very best of ourselves and help others to do the same. Bodhichitta is a basic human wisdom that can drive away the sorrows of the world.

*Bodhi* means “awake”; free from ordinary, confused mind, free from the illusion that we’re separated from one another. *Chitta* means “heart” or “mind.” According to Shantideva and the Buddha before him, the unbiased mind and good heart of bodhi hold the key to happiness and peace.

Shantideva begins his teaching with a traditional four-part opening. First, he expresses his gratitude and respect. Second, he makes a commitment to complete his presentation. Third, he expresses humility; and in verse 3, he rouses confidence. This formal beginning was very familiar to the monks of Nalanda, but its personal touch and freshness made it unique.

### 1.1

To those who go in bliss, the Dharma they have mastered, and to all their heirs,  
To all who merit veneration, I bow down.  
According to tradition, I shall now in brief describe  
The entrance to the bodhisattva discipline.

These opening lines pay homage to the “Three Jewels”: the Buddha, dharma, and sangha. In the standard formula, the historical Buddha is regarded as an example or role model. The dharma refers to his teachings, and the sangha to the monastic practitioners and advanced bodhisattvas. Here however Shantideva takes our understanding of the Three Jewels deeper.

*Those who go in bliss* naturally includes the buddhas, but it also refers to our own potential. We, too, can free ourselves from the hopes and fears of self-centeredness. The bliss of perceiving reality without these limitations is our birthright. Thus Shantideva doesn’t bow down to something outside himself, but to his own capacity for enlightenment. He venerates those who have realized what remains possible for us all.

*The Dharma they have mastered* refers not only to written and oral teachings, but also to the truth of direct experience, to straightforward, unedited life as it is. Whatever happens to us—good, bad, happy or sad—can free us from self-absorption. If we make use of these ever-present opportunities, then everything we encounter is dharma.

*All their heirs* refers to the mature sangha with its great sanity and compassion, but also includes aspiring bodhisattvas. All of us willing to move beyond our self-importance and find ways to care for each other are considered the Buddha’s heirs.

Finally, to express his gratitude to *all who merit veneration*, he bows to the teachers and friends who have helped him along the path.

As the second step in this traditional opening, Shantideva presents his subject and commits ~~complete his teaching without obstacles. Moreover, he will do this according to tradition,~~ presenting what he's learned and understood from the Buddha, dharma, sangha, and his other teachers as well.

We can't overestimate the power of commitment. Until we resolve unequivocally to undertake a task and see it through to the end, there is always hesitation and vacillation. Remember that Shantideva had been invited to give this talk by monks who were trying to humiliate him. Considering his audience, it's possible that he had some trepidation. Therefore, he calls on an egoless courage that is not easily threatened and goes forward.

## 1.2

What I have to say has all been said before,  
And I am destitute of learning and of skill with words.  
I therefore have no thought that this might be of benefit to others;  
I wrote it only to sustain my understanding.

Invoking a humility that is also traditional, Shantideva expresses a clear understanding of the danger of arrogance. He knows that even if the Buddha were sitting in front of him, it would do him no good if his mind were filled with pride.

Humility, however, should not be confused with low self-esteem. When Shantideva says he is *destitute of learning and of skill with words*, he is not expressing self-contempt. The low self-esteem so common in the West rests on a fixed idea of personal inadequacy. Shantideva is committed to not getting trapped in such limiting identities. He is simply humble enough to know where he gets stuck and intelligent enough to realize he has the tools to free himself.

In the final lines of this verse, Shantideva explains that he originally composed this narrative as personal encouragement, never dreaming that he'd be sharing it with others.

## 1.3

My faith will thus be strengthened for a little while,  
That I might grow accustomed to this virtuous way.  
But others who now chance upon my words,  
May profit also, equal to myself in fortune.

In verse 3, Shantideva completes the traditional opening by rousing confidence. To compose this text and live by its words brings him great joy. The thought that his self-reflections might now profit others makes him even happier.

In this spirit of gladness and gratitude, Shantideva begins his main presentation.

## 1.4

So hard to find such ease and wealth  
Whereby to render meaningful this human birth!  
If now I fail to turn it to my profit,  
How could such a chance be mine again?

~~From the Buddhist point of view, human birth is very precious. Shantideva assumes that we understand this preciousness, with its relative *ease and wealth*. He urges us to contemplate our good situation and not to miss this chance to do something meaningful with our lives.~~

This life is, however, a brief and fading window of opportunity. None of us knows what will happen next. As I've grown older with my sangha brothers and sisters, I've seen many friends die or experience dramatic changes in their health or mental stability. Right now, even though our lives may seem far from perfect, we have excellent circumstances. We have intelligence, the availability of teachers and teachings, and at least some inclination to study and meditate. But some of us will die before the year is up; and in the next five years, some of us will be too ill or in too much pain to concentrate on a Buddhist text, let alone live by it.

Moreover, many of us will become more distracted by worldly pursuits—for two, ten, twenty years or the rest of our lives—and no longer have the leisure to free ourselves from the rigidity of self-absorption.

In the future, outer circumstances such as war or violence might become so pervasive that we won't have time for honest self-reflection. This could easily happen. Or, we might fall into the trap of too much comfort. When life feels so pleasurable, so luxurious and cozy, there is not enough pain to turn us away from worldly seductions. Lulled into complacency, we become indifferent to the suffering of our fellow beings.

The Buddha assures us that our human birth is ideal, with just the right balance of pleasure and pain. The point is not to squander this good fortune.

## 1.5

As when a flash of lightning rends the night,  
And in its glare shows all the dark black clouds had hid,  
Likewise rarely, through the buddhas' power,  
Virtuous thoughts rise, brief and transient, in the world.

## 1.6

Thus behold the utter frailty of goodness!  
Except for perfect bodhichitta,  
There is nothing able to withstand  
The great and overwhelming strength of evil.

In verses 5 and 6, the initial arising of bodhichitta is described as transient and frail. The mahayana teachings usually tell us that it's *neurosis* that is transient and insubstantial, like clouds in a clear blue sky. When we're having our emotional upheavals, the buddhas and bodhisattvas don't see us as stupid or hopeless; they see our confusion as mere troubled weather, ephemeral and fleeting, passing through our skylike mind.

But verses 5 and 6 are not from the point of view of the buddhas and bodhisattvas; they're from our point of view. We are the ones who feel stuck behind the clouds: maybe we don't have what it takes, maybe we're too weak. Even with the occasional glimpse of sky, it all seems too hard, too painful. We hear this kind of talk often, coming from our own mouths as well as from others'.

Instead of experiencing our hang-ups as solid and everlasting, rather than definitely believing

they're "me," we *could* say, "This is just weather, it will pass. This is not the fundamental state. From Shantideva's perspective, these glimpses of bodhi mind have great power. Everyone knows what it's like for the clouds to part, even briefly, and to feel a sense of potential and possibility. Without this initial or ongoing flash, we'd never be inspired to investigate this path.

## 1.7

The mighty buddhas, pondering for many ages,  
Have seen that this, and only this, will save  
The boundless multitudes,  
And bring them easily to supreme joy.

Shantideva knows that we can trust these glimpses of bodhichitta and that by recognizing and nurturing them, these glimpses will grow. The awakened ones, *pondering for many ages*, have seen that only this good heart of bodhi can keep us from getting hooked in the same old, self-centered ways.

At this point we might ask why bodhichitta has such power. Perhaps the simplest answer is that it lifts us out of self-centeredness and gives us a chance to leave dysfunctional habits behind. Moreover, everything we encounter becomes an opportunity to develop the outrageous courage of the bodhi heart.

When we get hit hard, we look outward and see how other people also have difficult times. When we feel lonely or angry or depressed, we let these dark moods link us with the sorrows of others.

We share the same reactivity, the same grasping and resisting. By aspiring for all beings to be free of their suffering, we free ourselves from our own cocoons and life becomes bigger than "me." No matter how dark and gloomy or joyful and uplifted our lives are, we can cultivate a sense of shared humanity.

This expands our whole perspective. Trungpa Rinpoche used to say, "The essence of the mahayana is thinking bigger." Shantideva presents that essence. His teachings are a guide to compassionate living and bigger thinking.

## 1.8

Those who wish to overcome the sorrows of their lives,  
And put to flight the pain and suffering of beings,  
Those who wish to win such great beatitude,  
Should never turn their back on bodhichitta.

When Shantideva mentions *those who wish to overcome the sorrows of their lives*, he addresses the foundation teachings of Buddhism, which emphasize the cessation of personal suffering. When he talks of putting *to flight the pain and suffering of beings*, he points to the mahayana intention to free everyone without exception from pain.

Of course, he isn't saying: "I'll just look after others. It doesn't matter that I'm unhappy and constantly worried, or that I hate myself and my temper is out of control." There's no question that we want to end our own suffering. But the shift in mahayana Buddhism is this: we want to end our personal suffering so we can help others put an end to theirs. This is Shantideva's strongest message and the essence of bodhichitta.

Most of us want to share what we've understood with others. Yet in trying to do this, we see even more clearly the work that still needs to be done on ourselves. At some point, we realize that what we do for ourselves benefits others, and what we do for others benefits us. This is what Shantideva means when he says that those who wish to win great happiness *should never turn their back on bodhichitta*.

1.9

Should bodhichitta come to birth  
In one who suffers in the dungeons of samsara,  
In that instant he is called the buddhas' heir,  
Worshipful alike to gods and men.

A pithy explanation of the Sanskrit word *samsara* is Albert Einstein's definition of insanity: "Doing the same thing over and over and thinking we'll get different results." Shantideva describes this as being caught in *the dungeons of samsara*. Nevertheless, even when we feel trapped in repetitive habits, we can feel kindness and empathy for others. When even a momentary flash of bodhichitta is born, that instant we become a child of the buddhas and worthy of universal respect.

This verse, according to Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche, may be a critique of Hindu society. Shantideva is saying that we don't have to be from a certain caste to experience bodhichitta; even those considered "untouchables" are the buddhas' heirs.

Bodhichitta is not some elitist theory for sophisticated or well-educated people. It's for everyone. We don't ever have to feel we're too hopeless to call on bodhichitta; nor can we look scornfully at others and label them too frivolous or arrogant to qualify. Everyone in the dungeons of samsara is a candidate for awakening a compassionate heart.

1.10

For like the supreme substance of the alchemists,  
It takes the impure form of human flesh  
And makes of it the priceless body of a buddha.  
Such is bodhichitta: we should grasp it firmly!

1.11

If the perfect leaders of all migrant beings  
Have with boundless wisdom seen its priceless worth,  
We who wish to leave our nomad wandering  
Should hold well to this precious bodhichitta.

1.12

All other virtues, like the plantain tree,  
Produce their fruit, but then their force is spent.  
Alone the marvelous tree of bodhichitta  
Will bear its fruit and grow unceasingly.

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1.13

As though they pass through perils guarded by a hero,  
Even those weighed down with dreadful wickedness  
Will instantly be freed through having bodhichitta.  
Who then would not place his trust in it?

1.14

Just as by the fires at the end of time,  
Great sins are utterly consumed by bodhichitta.  
Thus its benefits are boundless,  
As the Wise and Loving Lord explained to Sudhana.

In this section Shantideva gives six analogies for bodhichitta. The first, in verse 10, is alchemy. Bodhichitta can use anything—any ordinary thought, deed, or word—to ventilate our self-absorption. In verses 11 through 14, the analogies are a priceless jewel, a wish-fulfilling tree, a hero, and the fire at the end of time. The sixth analogy is a kind of etcetera, which refers to a Buddhist scripture where many other analogies are described.

The *perfect leaders* in verse 11 are the buddhas and bodhisattvas. Like experienced ship captains in search of gems, they know the *priceless worth* of a good jewel when they see it. Sailors trust the captains and associate them with wealth; with them, they might make their fortunes and leave the *nomad wandering*. Shantideva says we can have the same confidence. Like sailors who trust the captain's knowledge, we can trust the Buddha's evaluation of *precious bodhichitta*.

In verse 12, bodhichitta is compared to a wish-fulfilling tree that produces fruit forever. In contrast, the plantain tree bears fruit only once before it dies. Likewise, helping someone is always a good thing and will bear fruit in a limited way. But if our help is motivated by the longing to free the person from confusion altogether, it will bear fruit until they attain enlightenment. A simple act of kindness with bodhichitta intention can open us to this expansive possibility.

The analogy in verse 13 is a hero, comparable to a good friend who keeps us out of trouble. The *perils* refer to the ripening of our negative karmic seeds. When we use these difficult situations for opening up instead of shutting down, it's like being accompanied by a protector.

In verse 14, the comparison is to a great fire that burns up negative tendencies. Ordinarily we burn into our negative habits, acting them out or turning them against ourselves. Either way, we make them stronger.

Bodhisattvas practice “in the middle of the fire.” This means they enter into the suffering of the world; it also means they stay steady with the fire of their own painful emotions. They neither act them out nor repress them. They are willing to stay “on the dot” and explore an emotion's ungraspable qualities and fluid energies—and to let that experience link them to the pain and courage of others.

The sixth analogy refers to a Buddhist scripture in which a future buddha, called Maitreya, gave 23 other examples of bodhichitta to his disciple Sudhana.

1.15

Bodhichitta, the awakening mind,

In brief is said to have two aspects:

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First, aspiring, *bodhichitta in intention*;

Then, *active bodhichitta*, practical engagement.

1.16

Wishing to depart and setting out upon the road,

This is how the difference is conceived.

The wise and learned thus should understand

This difference, which is ordered and progressive.

Here Shantideva presents the two aspects of relative bodhichitta: aspiration and action. Aspiring, or intentional, bodhichitta is like wishing to take a trip; active bodhichitta is actually setting out on the journey. We first aspire to attain enlightenment and benefit others, then we do whatever it takes to make this a reality.

To give a mundane example: let's say you're stuck in grasping or craving; you know that you collect and hoard, that you panic when something's taken from you or you have to let it go. How do you work with unreasonable attachment, for your own sake and the happiness of others?

One way would be to cultivate generosity. At the level of aspiration bodhichitta, you might look around your room for something you love. Then, visualize giving it away: your beautiful red sweater, that special book, or the chocolate you're hoarding under your bed. You don't have to literally give it away, just visualize this. Then expand the offering to include millions of sweaters, books, or chocolates. Send these out to particular individuals or into the universe for anyone to receive.

In this way, aspiration bodhichitta accomplishes two things: it fulfills our wish to lessen the pain of self-absorption and our wish to benefit others. Moreover, if we aspire for others to experience not only our gifts but also the joys of an unfettered mind, our intention becomes vaster still.

Intention bodhichitta is a powerful way to work with situations we don't feel ready to handle. For example, by simply aspiring to give away something we're attached to, we train our fearful mind to let go. Then active bodhichitta—in this case, the ability to literally *give*—will come about in time.

If we equate “giving” with “freedom from craving,” then we become more eager to act, even if it causes some pain.

1.17

*Bodhichitta in intention* bears rich fruit

For those still wandering in samsara.

And yet a ceaseless stream of merit does not flow from it;

For this will rise alone from *active bodhichitta*.

1.18

For when, with irreversible intent,

The mind embraces bodhichitta,

Willing to set free the endless multitudes of beings,

At that instant, from that moment on,

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1.19

A great and unremitting stream,  
A strength of wholesome merit,  
Even during sleep and inattention,  
Rises equal to the vastness of the sky.

Aspiration bodhichitta brings enormous benefit. For those of us wandering in samsara, it *bears ripe fruit*. We can see why this would follow. At the level of intention, we begin with what's manageable and let our understanding evolve. By the time we're able to act on our intention, we have realized something profound: we've understood that selfless action liberates *us* from fear and sorrow.

In verses 18 and 19, Shantideva explains that our intention to free all beings from suffering can become irreversible, bringing benefit *equal to the vastness of the sky*. This happens when we no longer question the wisdom of thinking of others; we truly know this to be the source of indestructible happiness. Something shifts at the core of our being, and when it does, we experience a ceaseless flow of benefit *even during sleep and inattention*.

This is the happiness of egolessness. It's the joy of realizing there is no prison; there are only very strong habits, and no sane reason for strengthening them further. In essence these habits are insubstantial. Moreover, there is no solid self-identity or separateness. We've invented it all. It is the realization that we want for *the endless multitudes of beings*.

1.20

This the Tathagata,  
In the sutra Subahu requested,  
Said with reasoned demonstration,  
Teaching those inclined to lesser paths.

Here, Shantideva tells us that the Buddha gave this teaching on the merits of bodhichitta to people *inclined to lesser paths*, those primarily seeking freedom from their personal pain. In this sutra requested by his disciple Subahu, the Buddha was inspiring them to take the next step and awaken bodhichitta.

His reasoning goes like this: sentient beings are as countless as grains of sand in the Ganges. Because there are more than the mind can grasp, the wish to save them all is equally inconceivable. By making such an aspiration, our ordinary, confused mind stretches far beyond its normal capacity; it stretches limitlessly. When we expand our personal longing for liberation to include immeasurable numbers of beings, the benefit we receive is equally immeasurable.

In short, the more we connect with the inconceivable, indescribable vastness of mind, the more joyful we will be.

1.21

If with kindly generosity

One merely has the wish to soothe  
The aching heads of other beings,  
Such merit knows no bounds.

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1.22

No need to speak, then, of the wish  
To drive away the endless pain  
Of each and every living being,  
Bringing them unbounded virtues.

This is the logic of the mahayana. If it's wonderful for one person's headache to be soothed, the even better if everyone's headaches could be relieved.

Of course, when our wish becomes immeasurable, it could create a dilemma. Would-be bodhisattvas who take the teachings too literally might say: "There's no way to eliminate the headaches of all beings! What are we going to do? Send everyone in the world an aspirin?"

On the other hand, there is the response of Bernard Glassman Roshi, who worked with the homeless in Yonkers, New York. He said that he knew there was no way to end homelessness, yet he would devote his life to trying. This is the aspiration of a bodhisattva. Don't worry about results; just open your heart in an inconceivably big way, in that limitless way that benefits everyone you encounter. Don't worry whether or not it's doable. The intention is vast: may everyone's physical pain be relieved and, even more to the point, may everyone attain enlightenment.

1.23

Could our fathers or our mothers  
Ever have so generous a wish?  
Do the very gods, the rishis, even Brahma  
Harbor such benevolence as this?

1.24

For in the past they never,  
Even in their dreams, conceived  
Such profit even for themselves.  
How could they have such aims for others' sake?

Our mothers and fathers may be very kind. But even though they raise us and want what's best for us, can they free us from our habitual patterns? More importantly, do they aspire for all beings without exception to be equally free? In verse 23, Shantideva makes another reference to the Hindu religion by asking if even the *rishis* (venerated sages) or Brahma (the creator of the universe) would have such an aspiration as this.

In these verses, Shantideva refers indirectly to the caste system in which some people are worthy of awakening and others, because of their bad karma, are not. If even the gods and *rishis* think like this, how could they wish for others to be free from biased mind?

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1.25

For beings do not wish their own true good,  
So how could they intend such good for others' sake?  
This state of mind so precious and so rare  
Arises truly wondrous, never seen before.

When Shantideva talks about those who *do not wish their own true good*, he's referring to most of us. Working with habitual patterns is not usually our priority. Most of us are not impassioned about deescalating our emotions and prejudices or awakening bodhichitta. This *true good* is not our main focus. We'd simply like to get through the day without mishap, and we definitely don't want to be bothered with those who give us grief. Yet without the aspiration for freedom, how could we want the good for others? We can only wish for them what we value for ourselves.

This opportunity to awaken bodhichitta is *so precious and so rare*. To experience something that liberates us from the narrowmindedness of our biases and preconceptions is, as Shantideva says, *truly wondrous*. What's more, there is no one who cannot experience this, if they're willing to give it a try.

1.26

The pain-dispelling draft,  
This cause of joy for those who wander through the world—  
This precious attitude, this jewel of mind,  
How shall it be gauged or quantified?

What is comparable to this *pain-dispelling draft*? This excellent medicine of bodhichitta frees us from self-centeredness, bringing us relief and a loving heart.

*This cause of joy* is found by *those who wander through the world*. Even we baby bodhisattvas don't design our lives to escape the chaos of the world; we go into the thick of things and work with whatever we find. Samsara becomes our practice ground, our boot camp, so to speak. If we find we continually get hooked into the drama, we temporarily retreat to work on ourselves. But our passion to alleviate ever greater depths of suffering and meet ever greater challenges with equanimity.

1.27

For if the simple thought to be of help to others  
Exceeds in worth the worship of the buddhas,  
What need is there to speak of actual deeds  
That bring about the weal and benefit of beings?

1.28

For beings long to free themselves from misery,  
But misery itself they follow and pursue.  
They long for joy, but in their ignorance

Destroy it, as they would a hated enemy.

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Again Shantideva praises the benefits of an ordinary, altruistic thought, while adding how much greater it is to actually follow through. To help others at the most meaningful level, however, we first address our own confusion.

As Shantideva points out, although we long to free ourselves from misery, it is *misery itself* we must *follow and pursue*. We may assume we do crazy things intentionally, but in truth these actions aren't always volitional. Our conditioning is sometimes so deep that we cause harm without even realizing it. We long for joy and do the very things that destroy our peace of mind. Again and again, we unwittingly make matters worse. If we're going to help other people get free, we have to work compassionately with our own unfortunate tendencies. Shantideva, we will find, is an expert at dismantling these repeating patterns.

1.29

But those who fill with bliss  
All beings destitute of joy,  
Who cut all pain and suffering away  
From those weighed down with misery,

1.30

Who drive away the darkness of their ignorance—  
What virtue could be matched with theirs?  
What friend could be compared to them?  
What merit is there similar to this?

Verses 29 and 30 refer indirectly to the *paramita* of generosity, the generosity that frees us from stress and selfishness. According to the teachings, there are three types of generosity, three ways of helping others by giving of ourselves.

The first kind of generosity is the giving of material things, such as food and shelter.

The second is “giving the gift of fearlessness.” We help those who are afraid. If someone is scared of the dark, we give them a flashlight; if they're going through a fearful time, we comfort them; if they're having night terrors, we sleep next to them. This may sound easy, but it takes time and effort and care.

The third kind of generosity drives away the darkness of ignorance. This is “the gift of dharma” and is considered the most profound. Although no one can eliminate our ignorance but ourselves nevertheless, through example and through teachings, we can inspire and support one another.

The inconceivable wish to help all sentient beings always begins with oneself. Our own experience is the only thing we have to share. Other than that, we can't pretend to be more awake or more compassionate than we actually are. Much of our realization comes from the honest recognition of our foibles. The inability to measure up to our own standards is decidedly humbling. It allows us to empathize with other people's difficulties and mistakes.

In short, the best friend is one who realizes our sameness and is skilled in helping us help ourselves.

### 1.31

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If they who do some good, in thanks  
For favors once received, are praised,  
Why need we speak of bodhisattvas—  
Those who freely benefit the world?

### 1.32

Those who, scornfully with condescension,  
Give, just once, a single meal to others—  
Feeding them for only half a day—  
Are honored by the world as virtuous.

### 1.33

What need is there to speak of those  
Who constantly bestow on boundless multitudes  
The peerless joy of blissful buddhahood,  
The ultimate fulfillment of their hopes?

Verse 32 refers to the Indian custom of formalized giving. If once a day, week, or month one gives meals to beggars, one is seen as a virtuous member of society. Thus Shantideva addresses giving with an agenda.

Most of us living in cities with homeless people do this. We come up with a plan—like giving to the first person who asks us—in hope of relieving our guilt for the rest of the day. Of course, giving this way is beneficial, but we could definitely stretch further. When we give money to homeless men and women, we could aspire for them to be free of all their pain. We could aspire to extend our own comfort and happiness to them and to homeless people everywhere. Even more to the point, we could recognize how much we have in common and give freely without resentment or condescension.

Even in the very early stages of practicing aspiration bodhichitta, we can include all beings. *bestowing on boundless multitudes the peerless joy of blissful buddhahood* seems a bit beyond you, just keep it real. When we get sick, for example, we don't usually think of the sickness of others. But that shift can happen: when you fall ill, you could think of others in the same boat. Even getting into a soothing bath could bring you out of your cocoon. Countless people don't have such comfort: people who are freezing and longing for warmth, people who are exhausted and have no way to relax. We can aspire for all beings to be free of their suffering and to enjoy the pleasures we ourselves enjoy.

The last three verses address the proper treatment of a bodhisattva.

### 1.34

And those who harbor evil in their minds  
Against such lords of generosity, the Buddha's heirs,  
Will stay in hell, the Mighty One has said,  
For ages equal to the moments of their malice.

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1.35

By contrast, good and virtuous thoughts  
Will yield abundant fruits in greater measure.  
Even in adversity, the bodhisattvas  
Never bring forth evil—only an increasing stream of goodness.

1.36

To them in whom this precious sacred mind  
Is born—to them I bow!  
I go for refuge in that source of happiness  
That brings its very enemies to perfect bliss.

In verse 34, we have the first mention of hell. As a child, I was taught that hell was the ultimate punishment. This is where you were sent when you died if you were really, really bad. I'm glad to report this isn't the view here. To understand this reference from a Buddhist perspective, we look at cause and effect and the way we continually imprint our minds. We sow the seeds of our future hell or happiness by the way we open or close our minds right now.

The all-consuming hells described graphically in many Tibetan texts do not exist apart from the minds of the beings who experience them. For instance, in his final dedication, Shantideva refers to *those whose hell it is to fight and wound*. The idea here is that when we intentionally harm another, particularly someone dedicated to benefiting others, the long-term consequences of our cruelty will be experienced as hellish outer circumstances. It is our own aggression that hurts us. It's not that we're punished and sent to hell; hell is the manifestation of a vindictive mind.

It is also important to understand what Shantideva means by *those who harbor evil in their minds*. The key word here is "harbor." Harboring hatred toward anyone produces an anguished frame of mind. We remain in this hellish state *for ages equal to the moments* of our wrath—in other words, for as long as we hold on to our hatred, instead of letting it go.

*Virtuous thoughts*, on the other hand, bring us happiness. Instead of separating us and making us feel more cut off and afraid, they bring us closer to others.

In verse 35, Shantideva says that *even in adversity* bodhisattvas bring forth only goodness. Frequently, in times of adversity we become afraid, striking out in anger or indulging in various addictions, in hope of escaping our pain. Shantideva says that bodhisattvas let the suffering of adversity soften them and make them kinder, and that we could aspire to do the same.

This bodhisattva path takes some work. Our habitual patterns are very entrenched. Nevertheless, when hard times make us more selfish and withdrawn, we could see this as our moment of truth. Transformation can occur right in this painful place. Instead of the *evil* of more neurosis and harshness, adversity can bring about humility and empathy. By bringing us to our knees, so to speak, it can tenderize us and make us more capable of reaching out to others.

In the last verse, Shantideva bows to all of us who are willing to awaken bodhichitta; and he bows to bodhichitta itself, *the source of happiness that brings its very enemies to perfect bliss*.

These closing words may seem to contradict verse 34, with its hellish consequences for those who act aggressively. But from the point of view of the awakened ones, happiness can come even to those who *harbor evil in their minds*. As a result of our compassionate intentions, even our "enemies" can

be liberated from self-absorption and thus attain enlightenment.

~~Knowing where the root of happiness lies saves us from escalating pain. If someone insults you, for instance, you may long to retaliate, but you know this won't benefit anyone. Instead, in the very grip of wanting to get even, you can say to yourself, "May the rage that I feel toward this person cause both of us to be liberated."~~

This is the aspiration of a young bodhisattva, one in the process of learning to let go. Even if we don't genuinely *feel* it, we're able to say, "May this seemingly negative connection be our link to waking up."

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