

## Shantideva

### Shantideva

*“One might think that because no being can be discovered, there are none on whom to bestow compassion, but what is done even in confusion is because of a purpose.*

*If, however, there is no being, whose is the purpose? The effort is illusory, but because it serves to tranquilize sorrow, this delusion is not forbidden.*

*When, through my effort and by raising a cloud of merit, may I make tranquil those who are troubled in the fire of sorrow?*

*When, by zealous and meritorious deeds for the unveiling of the truth, may I point towards shunyata those who see only fantasies?”*

“Bodhicaryavatara,”

Shantideva

What is Shantideva’s position regarding this apparent paradox? On the one hand, he teaches no beings exist. On the other, he teaches the Path to be one of compassion brought to us by those who eternally seek to awaken us from our mayavic dreams. Shantideva is one such being.

Chandrakirti laid the foundations for and initiated the *Prasangika Madyamika* Buddhist lineage. Shantideva became its most acknowledged sage bringing to this lineage his mystic vision, wisdom and compassion.

Shantideva was born in the eighth century to the ruler of a small kingdom in modern Gujarat. As a young child, he experienced a vision of *Manjushri*, the *Bodhisattva* of Wisdom. This experience was repeated just prior to the time he was to ascend the throne. *Manjushri* appeared to Shantideva as his

---

## Shantideva

“spiritual friend” warning him not to become the new ruler. At nearly the same time, Shantideva had a dream in which *Tara*, the female aspect of *Avalokiteshvara* — the Being from which emanate both Wisdom and Compassion — disguised as his mother, consecrated him. As did The Buddha before him, Shantideva left his royal life, left the kingdom, to wander alone in a forest for twenty-one days. He came upon a woman who offered him sweet water and led him to a *yogin* who initiated him into Buddhist teachings and meditations. He is said to have soon reached *samadhi* coming to see the woman and the *yogin* as Tara and Manjushri. For the remainder of his life, this vision of *Manjushri* remained alive within him.

He traveled to Nalanda in India, to receive ordination into the lineage and given the name Shantideva from the *upadhyaya* Jayadeva. Many of the monks thought him to be a spiritual fraud. He consumed huge quantities of rice and seemed to sleep much of the time. To expose him as such, the senior monks ordered a recitation of the *sutras* from memory, expecting Shantideva to fail when his turn came. When it became his time to recite, he asked them if they would like to hear an old *sutra* or a *sutra* wholly new. The elders chose the latter. He at once began to utter the *Bodhicaryavatara* (Entering the Path of Enlightenment) a poetic, spiritual and philosophical discourse on the *Bodhisattva* Path. As he began to utter verse (IX, 35), “When existence and non-existence cease to be present to the mind...”, he rose into the air, becoming invisible, though his voice could still be clearly heard. There immediately ceased to be any gossip in Nalanda regarding his routines. The reverence for him was so great that Taranatha bestowed upon him the sacred title *acharya* (spiritual teacher) of the Buddhist tradition in India.

While still at Nalanda, he also composed the *Shikshasamuccaya*, a collection of Buddhist teachings, drawing together citations from a vast number of *sutras* and texts. In it, he emphasizes the moral dimensions of the *Bodhisattva* Path, while the *Bodhicaryavatara* focuses upon the Path from the standpoint of consciousness. Shantideva

## Shantideva

also engaged in dialectical debates, always advocating a mystical view of the highest doctrines, insisting that logical clarity serve the ends of intuitive insight.

According to tradition, he traveled south to a now unknown place to debate a number of *tirthikas* (non-believers: cf. “The Voice of the Silence”), who had rejected Buddha’s teachings. He won many of them over with his dialectical skills and, though many attested to his magical powers, his “seven wonderful acts,” emphasized the conversion of different groups of opponents. Sometime, late in the seventh century, he disappeared from history. The time, place and manner of his death remain unknown.

The heart, the essence of the *Bodhisattva* Path, is *bodhichitta*, the seed thought of Enlightenment. Thus, the *Bodhisattva* is the paradigm of the path to Enlightenment. Because the *Bodhisattva* pauses at the threshold of becoming a Buddha, who assumes the *Dharmakaya* glory (cf. “The Voice of the Silence”), but is cut off from giving aid directly to human beings still mired in the illusions and delusions of *samsara*, he is suspended, between the relativity of illusions and the certitude of Reality. He reaches down from the *noumenal* realm of pure thought to help all those wishing to make an attempt at treading the Path he has trodden. Though the *Arhat* and the *Bodhisattva* are identical in their essential natures, the former seizes the Enlightenment earned and becomes an example for others to follow. The *Bodhisattva*, on the other hand, holds back — in a most mysterious way, inexplicable to ordinary consciousness — and actually reaches out to help those who would walk the Path. The unfathomable depths of this mystery, of this most mysterious aid to struggling humanity, is bound up with *bodhichitta*, that spark of consciousness which, when activated, turns the aspirant towards *bodhi*, Enlightenment. The distinction between *Arhat* and *Bodhisattva* is less to be found in states of consciousness than in the linkage between that changeless realm and the world of transient phenomena.

## Shantideva

*Bodhichitta* is the idea of Enlightenment, its suffusion through the whole of consciousness, and the force it exerts in impelling one along the Path. It is *Buddhannubhava*, the “gesture” of Buddha, which turns consciousness, if even but for a moment, to the good. It permanently transforms the seeker’s perception of the world, giving new balance and orientation to everything in *samsara*. As *dukha*, suffering, is the defining characteristic of temporal existence, *bodhichitta* is the inexplicable infusion of a higher consciousness, a higher reality into the otherwise seamless fabric of ignorance. Thus, *Bodhichitta* is an *event* falling outside the causality of ordinary mind and nature, a kind of grace from Buddha, or from an enlightened Guru. It is as if *shunyata*, the Void, calls to the Void, and the arising of *bodhichitta* within one is its echo.

“This merit — seed of the world’s joy, medicine for the world’s sorrow, jewel of *chitta*, the mind — how can it be measured?”

*Bodhichitta* contains the potency required for the entire pilgrimage to Enlightenment and it is “the womb of *karuna*, compassion. With it, light can vanquish darkness, knowledge can surmount ignorance and spiritual discernment can subdue suffering.” The arising of *bodhichitta* completes one’s birth as a human being, for one becomes a *Buddhaputra*, a Buddha-son, a member of the *Buddhakula*, the Buddha family.

As *karuna* is the child of *bodhichitta*, the ray of *shunyata*, activated in human consciousness is not a quality, a property of the individual or a means for the redemption of the individual alone. It is the mysterious, alchemical source of universal purpose, the ground of *mahartha siddhi*, *the great work*, and the force within *jagad dhitartha*, the work of the world’s well-being. For Shantideva, it is less important that one grasp the ten stages on the *Bodhisattva* Path than that one understands that the activation of *bodhichitta* compels a two-fold practice. *Bodhipranidhichitta*, the thought of the vow

## Shantideva

of Enlightenment, arises, spontaneously, with the advent of *bodhichitta*, and is immediately followed by *bodhiprasthanachitta*, “the departure upon the road to realization.” When one comes to the fortunate condition in which one can “take the great vow,” *Mahapranidhara*, before a spiritual guide, *kalyanamitra*, one has not only come to an irreversible turning point in this life, but one affects the entire cycle of *samsara*. The great vow is The Shantideva Ordination, The Pledge of Kwan-Yin: The aspiration to achieve Enlightenment not separated from the Enlightenment of all beings. *Bodhichitta* is thus the spark of the *Bodhisattva* in every being and, once it is truly aroused, it becomes a consuming fire, which may have setbacks, but which expands without limit and can never be extinguished.

The deep joy, in the miraculous manifestation of *bodhichitta* within one’s deepest consciousness, naturally leads to an overwhelming sense of gratitude, which Shantideva expresses in terms: the *Tathagatas* (“those who have gone before”), the Jewel of the True *Dharma* and all the Buddhas, to the Buddha, the *Dharma* and the *Sangha*, mystically transfigured in the light of *bodhichitta*. He teaches that one should call upon all the great beings represented in these Three Jewels to take possession of one, when one is prepared to enter the strict servitude demanded by the *bhakti*, devotion, which has arisen in one. The seeker comes to recognize that neither *bodhichitta* nor refuge in the Three Jewels excuses one from the self-induced effort required on every step of the Path. After being immersed in spontaneous gratitude, comes a self-conscious act of purgation through *papadeshana*, “the confession of sins.” *Papadeshana* is not guilt-ridden indulgence in regret over one’s past misdeeds, which, at best, would be dependent upon a truncated, empirical review, upon partial memories. It is, rather, a reflection upon the evil in the world and the recognition that, given innumerable previous incarnations, one dare not presume to dissociate oneself from any of it.

## Shantideva

“Whatever evil, on the endless wheel of *samsara* or just right here, whatever evil was committed by me or was caused to be committed by me, and whatever was enjoyed foolishly, ending in self-destruction, that evil I confess, stricken with remorseful feeling.”

Once the student’s past deeds and connections through *karma* with every other living being has been honestly faced, one can authentically rejoice in everything that is good, *punyanemodana*, the mirror image of *papadeshana*. With these two, comes the capacity to begin fulfilling the *Bodhisattva* Vow, by utterly renouncing whatever meritorious *karma* one might have, or will receive, for the uplift of all beings. Together, these form the basis and substance of *bodhichittaparigraha*, seizing the seed of Enlightenment and retaining its efficacious radiance throughout the whole of consciousness, so that at every moment it suffuses thought, permeates intention and manifests in deeds.

“Today my birth is completed, my human nature is fulfilled. Today I have been born into the Buddha family and I am henceforth a Buddha-son. It is now for me to behave according to the customs of this family, so that there may be no stain put upon its spotlessness.”

Because of one’s own past actions, on the plane of consciousness (lower manasic, personal), one has developed attractions and repulsions which are readily expressed in joys, and fears, friends and enemies, pleasures and pains. Desire, hatred and anger are one’s real enemies, but, since they have no power in themselves, they cannot enslave one without one’s own cooperation. “Yet they are dwelling within my own mind and thus smile at me at their ease.” Ultimately, one can neither claim to be overpowered by them nor pretend that one does not have the resources to banish them. “I am stupid only

## Shantideva

because I make no effort,” writes Shantideva. In striving for *prajna*, wisdom, one can overcome *maya*, illusion, and this requires vigilance in the thought of Enlightenment. Since all one’s enemies and fears are lodged in consciousness, anger comes easily to one who has not developed considerable mental equipoise. If anger can be eradicated, Shantideva teaches, all one’s fears and enemies will vanish. Such awareness is *shila*, “harmonious conduct,” *in consciousness*. All who would walk the *Bodhisattva* Path must strive for it — though those who have the *indescribable* good fortune of association with a Guru will find themselves immensely aided. The ability to discern the dictates of love for all beings requires one to sometimes ignore conventional morality. And when dissipative circumstances indicate one’s giving should be checked, one must develop, through performance of duty, inward and outward. For this performance of duty to be an efficacious means of treading the Path, one has to bring one’s whole attention to each act undertaken. Additionally, one needs to shift attention from self-interested concern with the body to protecting the mind. By strengthening awareness and guarding consciousness from distractions and illusions, one gradually makes oneself an instrument of service in the cause of universal welfare.

*Kshanti*, patience, implies forbearance, forgiveness and tolerance at the broadest possible level. It is patience in respect to oneself and one’s imperfections, to karma which is exact, relentless and just, and to others. All levels of patience have hostility as their opposite and, hostility undermines what one has garnered from the arising of *bodhichitta*, and works against the Vow one has taken to help redeem all beings from the bonds of conditioned existence. Though one wishes to help all beings reach Enlightenment, one also knows that *no independent beings actually exist*. Rather than appropriating this doctrine to justify inaction, one should recognize it is so; there is no one and nothing towards which one need be hostile. If, as Buddha taught, the fundamental condition of *samsara* is *dukha* (suffering), then patience is critical to

## Shantideva

nurturing *bodhichitta* in the world. Through patience, one can come to endure a modicum of suffering without having to flee it or become obsessed with it. That degree of *Viraga*, indifference, can be extended gradually until neither pleasure nor pain of any intensity can divert one from the self-selected Way. *Kshanti* is, therefore, the best *tapas*, purgative discipline, and it allows one to take the *Bodhisattva* Vow at a new level of understanding and dedication.

“Let this, then, by my vow: the honouring of the *Tathagata*, the complete fulfillment of my own well being, the destruction of the sorrow of the world.”

To the extent one has secured the foundations of patience, one can begin to manifest *virya*, which is, for Shantideva, effort, heroism and a kind of pride.

“Self-mastery, aiming at courage and attainment of strength, identity of self and others, and likewise, exchange of self and others, are all aspects of *virya*.”

One’s tolerance and patience must not be allowed to lull one into complacency. Rather, they should prepare one for a fierce and unrelenting struggle to achieve the goal. Having learned to face *karma* and suffering, one should gain the strength to do something about them. Though Shantideva was well aware of the disease of separative pride, which destroys — if it is not itself destroyed — he saw that even it is only a pitiful reflection of a virtue. True pride, *mana*, is a will to persevere on behalf of all. One needs to so solidly identify with all beings that one is too proud to labor for the separative and false ego, or to allow distasteful work to be done by others, or even to permit the thought of giving up to cross one’s mind. One should think too much of oneself as a being, ultimately not different from all the beings in existence, to

## Shantideva

shun ruthless examination of one's faults and fearless correction of one's mistakes.

“As cotton is obedient to the coming and going of the wind, so one should proceed in obedience to one's resolution. Thus, *riddhi*, the wonder-working power, is utterly triumphant.”

The practice of *virya*, as a mental activity, manifests as wakefulness, heedfulness and concentration, and is sometimes called “unbounded industry.” At the same time, it is a commensurate tranquility of mind. The energy released by this combination provides the basis for *dhyana*, contemplation, reflection and abstraction, which culminates in *samadhi*, full meditation. Alert tranquility opens the way to clear vision. Although vision is possible long before this stage is reached, the recurrence of (or even the potential for) passionate attraction and revulsion discolors it. In *dhyana*, one can gain from one's visions the assurance that, though they will be only partial revelations of Truth, they will not be distorted or inverted. *Vipashyana* is the recognition of things as they are, and this supreme clarity of mind results in total detachment and renunciation of the fruits of action. Having vowed from the beginning to serve the spiritual welfare of all beings, and making real, through detachment, the ultimate equality of all beings, the *Bodhisattva* participates in a great alchemical mystery, through *dhyana*, the efflorescence of quiet consciousness.

“Whoever wishes quickly to rescue himself and another, should practice the supreme mystery – the exchanging of himself and the other.”

Ethically, this is the recognition of the virtues in others and the faults in one's self, followed by an exchange in which one seeks to emulate those virtues by exalting and not stealing them. On the plane of clear mind, it is the realization that one

## Shantideva

is not separate from others and that *karma* is understood fully only at the collective level. Psychologically, it is the willingness to assume the suffering of another and replace it with one's own bliss. But on a deeper, occult plane, which does not exclude other levels, it is the alchemical magic of lending one's consciousness and insight to another, giving invisible strength through meditation without removing the responsibility of another for his or her condition. This is the mysterious wonder-working power which Buddha called "the highest magic," easily misunderstood as vicarious atonement, but in fact the fundamental force at the root of all the *siddhis* or supernormal powers. Thus does the *Bodhisattva* become a pillar of the world, uplifting the whole of humanity — though unseen and unknown — to those who would benefit from beneficent acts.

Secure in *dhyana*, and beyond the possibility of retreat on the *Bodhisattva* Path, the traveler finds himself at the threshold of *prajna* perfect wisdom, beyond all conceivable formulation. Relative truths, many of which have been helpful, like a raft crossing a river, are left behind, once the raging waters are crossed, and one stands before *paramartha*, "that which is beyond the veiled." Truth, *satya*, is seen to be *shunyata*, a void, into which all relativities and partialities are dropped, an emptiness, in which there are no attitudes but, rather, a universal orientation. In its ineffable radiance, one sees that which is beyond form and formlessness, and one rejoices in the realization that there are no beings to be redeemed, though one will labor, without cessation, to redeem every being. The *Bodhisattva* now knows — and though that knowledge cannot be communicated to others, but only intimated, through symbol, metaphor, myth and analogy — he can act on it while not seeing himself as the actor. The fusion of perceiver, perception and perceived is as complete as it is inexplicable. The *Bodhisattva* now bears that revered designation in its highest meaning, and his signature is selflessness. His radical identification with all beings restrains him from disappearing in the release of *Nirvana*. Rather, in

Shantideva

*paranirvana*, that unspeakable consummation which is *attaining the Goal*, he now breathes and thinks for humanity, his every word a living balm and every act a benediction.

“As *Manjushri* walks in ten directions and to the sky’s edge for the increase of the prosperity of all beings, let my work be like his. As long as there is space and as long as the world exists, for that long let my existence be devoted to the world’s sorrows. Wherever is found the sorrow of the world, may it come to fruition in me, and may the world be comforted by the glorious host of *Bodhisattvas*. As the only medicine for the world’s sorrows, the only cause of happiness and success, may the Teacher — honoured everywhere — endure for long aeons. I pay homage to Manjughosha by the favour which makes the thought beautiful. I honour the *kalyanamitra*, the good friend, by the favour which he has thus increased.”

“Regard as true Renouncer him that makes Worship by work, for who renounceth not Works not as Yogin. So is that well said: ‘By works the votary doth rise to saint, and saintship is the ceasing from all works’; because the perfect Yogin acts — but acts, unmoved by passions and unbound by deeds, setting result aside.”

Shri Krishna

Barrett Culmback  
May 16, 2008