

Embodied Buddhism Class 7 Reading

The following verses are taken from Pema Chodron's book **No Time to Lose: A Timely Guide to the Way of the Bodhisattva** which is itself a beautiful translation and commentary on a very famous 8th CE Indian Buddhist text called the Bodhisatvacharyavatara.

*6.24 Never thinking, "Now I will be angry,"
People are impulsively caught up in anger.
Irritation, likewise, comes—
Though never plans to be experienced!*

A neutral event such as a fallen branch can result in various reactions: an emotional explosion, relaxation, or even laughter. Our response depends on how we've worked with our emotions up to that point. We don't set out to be angry, and likewise anger doesn't set out to be experienced. But when causes and conditions come together, we impulsively get caught up and swept away. Patience, Shantideva infers, is the antidote: in particular, the patience that comes from having sympathy for the complexity of our current situation.

*6.25
Every injury whatever,
The whole variety of evil deeds Is brought about by circumstances.
None is independent, none autonomous.*

Verse 25 presents the same idea. This moment is part of a continuum; it doesn't exist in isolation from all that came before. Our reaction to it is based on how we worked with our emotions previously, and our future depends on how we work with them right now. This is the crucial point.

*6.26
Conditions, once assembled, have no thought
That now they will give rise to some result.
And that which is engendered does not think
That it has been produced by such conditions.*

Our reactions are not as premeditated as we might think. They happen, Shantideva says again, because of past conditioning. I once stayed with a friend whose dog has an uncontrollable fear of brooms. Just getting the broom out of the closet and starting to sweep sends the poor creature into a tailspin. Although he is no longer in danger of being harmed, he still reacts with terror. You can't convince a dog not to be afraid of brooms, but you can work with your own mind and phobias. We all have our "brooms." We may never know what happened in the past to trigger our current

response. But in this very moment, we can work with our mind and develop patience. We don't have to spend a lifetime building up a case about the badness of brooms or the wrongness of our emotions.

6.27

*That which is referred to as the Primal Substance,
That which has been labeled as the Self
Do not come into being thinking "That is how I will arise."*

6.28

*That which is not manifest is not yet there,
So what could want to come to be?
And permanently drawn toward its object,
It can never cease from being so.*

6.29

*Indeed! This Self, if permanent,
Is certainly impassible like space itself.
And should it meet with other factors,
How should they affect it, since it is unchanging?*

*6.30 If, when things occur, it stays unchanged and as before,
What influence has action had on it?
They say that this affects the Self,
But what connection could there be between them?*

This section refutes the views of certain non-Buddhist schools of thought in Shantideva's time. One school believed in a "primal substance"; another, in the atman, or "Self," with a capital "S." In brief, these were beliefs in an absolute, unchanging principle, similar to notions of a "soul" or "God."

Because we long for certainty and something to hold on to, it's very reassuring to believe in some permanent, external essence that underlies everything. While we play out our relative dramas of hope and fear, there's no confusion in this underlying strata, which remains pure, unchanging, and undisturbed.

The Buddha, however, refuted such views. Nothing is unchanging or separate. The notion of an external, permanent essence is what Shantideva disproves here.

He is not, however, positing a belief in anything else. If we were to say "all is emptiness," Shantideva would refute that too. His intention is to pull the rug out from under any fixed view or solidified way of thinking. Instead, he points us toward the indescribable openness of mind: a mind free from any conceptualization whatsoever.

What is the day-to-day relevance of these verses? It's to give up creating more concepts. Don't get trapped by set ideas of self, or other, or anything else. Don't buy into the fixated thinking that results in anger.

Shantideva argues that any belief in a fixed or permanent entity doesn't make sense. If it hadn't yet manifested, then it could never come to be. If it already existed and was drawn in a certain direction, it could never cease from doing so. In other words, if things were fixed the way we think they are, then nothing could ever change!

6.31

*All things, then, depend on something else;
On this depends the fact that none are independent.
Knowing this, we will not be annoyed at objects
That resemble magical appearances.*

In the first two lines, Shantideva again says that all things are the result of complex causes and conditions: nothing exists independently. In the second two lines, he teaches on emptiness. Nothing is as it appears: we're like dream people getting annoyed at dream objects. Experiencing this, even momentarily, we see the absurdity of working ourselves into a frenzy.

This teaching on the insubstantial nature of everything is an important one to contemplate when going through the pain of detox.

6.33

*Thus, when enemies or friends
Are seen to act improperly,
Be calm and call to mind
That everything arises from conditions.*

Here we experience Shantideva's kind heart. He asks us to be calm. No matter who behaves improperly, enemies or friends, don't get so heated up and opinionated. Be calm and practice patience, in this case, by reflecting on the fact that why they do what they do is not so obvious. It arises from a variety of causes and conditions.

This ends the section on the second kind of patience: the patience that comes from realizing the complex reality of all situations. Verses 34 through 51 explore the third kind of patience: the patience that comes from developing tolerance.

6.34

*If things occurred to living beings
Following their wishes and intentions,
How could sorrow ever come to them—
For there is no one who desires to suffer?*

The Buddha taught that all beings wish to be happy and free of suffering. If this is so, Shantideva asks, why do we do such crazy things? As he's pointed out before, our desire for comfort is not usually in sync with our methods for achieving it. In the following few verses he gives some poignant examples of our insanity.

6.35

*Yet carelessly, all unaware,
They tear themselves on thorns and briars;*

*Thus, when enemies or friends
Are seen to act improperly,
Be calm and call to mind
That everything arises from conditions.*

6.36

*Some hang themselves or leap into the void,
Or eat bad food or swallow deadly poison,
Or by their evil conduct Bring destruction on themselves.*

6.37

*For when affliction seizes them,
They kill themselves, the selves they love so much.
So how could they not be the cause
Of pain and suffering for others?*

When consumed by passion, we stop eating and sleeping. We may break up marriages or betray our loved ones, oblivious to the pain we cause. We may even lie, steal, or kill ourselves. There are seemingly no limits to how far we'll go to achieve happiness, even when we know this happiness has never lasted in the past. If we're so willing to harm ourselves, it's not hard to understand how we could harm others.

6.38

*And when, as victims of defilement,
Beings even cause their own destruction,
Even if compassion does not rise in us,
We can at least refrain from being angry.*

We have to be honest with ourselves. At this point in our bodhisattva career, it may be asking too much to have compassion for some unlikable troublemaker. But we can at least refrain from speaking or acting out of anger. Even if we can't shed a tear over the ridiculousness of the human condition, by refraining from retaliation and the misery it causes, we will do what's best for everyone.

6.39

*If those who are like wanton children
Are by nature prone to injure others,*

*What point is there in being angry—
Like resenting fire for its heat?*

*6.40 And if their faults are fleeting and contingent,
If living beings are by nature wholesome,
It's likewise senseless to resent them—
As well be angry at the sky for having clouds!*

Verses 39 and 40 present two alternatives. If we believe that people are basically bad by nature, then why get angry with them? Why not simply accept that they're prone to causing harm, and let it go? Getting angry is like resenting fire for its heat. If we see people as basically good and their faults as fleeting and contingent, then why get upset at their temporary lapses? That would be like getting angry at the sky for having clouds. Remembering this, we can cool down on the spot and avoid unnecessary pain. My personal experience of working with Shantideva's instructions is that, even if some of them don't work for me, the willingness to simply pause—to create a gap and shift gears—always helps.

*6.41
Although indeed it is the stick that hurts me,
I am angry at the one who wields it, striking me.
But he is driven and impelled by anger—
So it is his wrath I should resent.*

This verse says more about developing patience through tolerance. How do we develop the willingness to not retaliate? Shantideva's approach is based on developing tenderness for the human predicament and, if that's not possible, to at least realize that anger increases our suffering. It's like eating poison seeds and wondering why we get sicker. To interrupt anger's momentum, he suggests these contemplations on the futility of our habitual responses. Ask yourself once again: Why do I get angry at people and not inanimate things? How much of my anger is caused by fixed views of good and bad, right and wrong? And couldn't I have some tolerance for others who, just like me, keep creating their own misery? The real culprits are the kleshas themselves, and couldn't we all use some compassionate guidance in working with them?

*6.42 I it was who in the past
Did harm to beings such as these.
And so, when others do me mischief,
It is only just that they should injure me.*

Here is another way to reflect on being harmed. Consider the law of karma: what goes around comes around. If you steal, you can expect at some future time to be robbed. If you gossip, sooner or later you'll be the one being slandered. When we

ponder the multiple factors coming together to cause an unfortunate event, we should at least consider that one of them is our former deeds.

Westerners often have a hard time with this teaching because of guilt. When difficult things happen, they think it's because they're fundamentally bad or being punished.

My favorite clarification of this misunderstanding comes from Kelsang Gyatso's book *Meaningful to Behold*. If a child is told not to play with matches and does so anyway, it may result in her getting burned. Then the child has a chance to learn about cause and effect first hand. As a result, she might conclude for herself that being careless with matches has painful results. She is wiser because of her mishap. But if the child feels she got burned as a punishment for not obeying Mommy and Daddy, then all she learns is guilt. Her intelligence is interfered with, and she doesn't profit from her mistake.

Understanding karma like this gives us tremendous freedom to create our own future. The way we relate to being hit on the head with a branch, right now, affects how we'll relate to being harmed at a later time.