Chapter 12 Generating the Awakened Mind

Practicing Wisdom

The Benefits of Cherishing Others

Shantideva states that all happiness and joy are the consequences of cherishing the well-being of other sentient beings, while all problems, tragedies, and disasters are the consequences of self-cherishing attitudes. What further need is there, he asks, to talk about this when we can see the qualities of the Buddha, who cherishes the welfare of other sentient beings, and the fate of ourselves, who are in this current state? We can easily be convinced of this by comparing the shortcomings of ordinary sentient beings with the enlightened qualities and wisdom of the buddhas. On the basis of this comparison, we are able to see the benefits and merits of the aspiration to cherish the welfare of other sentient beings and the faults and **disadvantages of a self-cherishing and self-centred attitude.**

Shantideva asks, **since self and others are equal in having the innate desire to be happy and to overcome suffering, why do we seek our own self-interest at the expense of others; even to the extent of being totally oblivious to them?** I think this points to something very true. **Like oneself, all other sentient beings are equal in having this wish to be happy and to overcome suffering. Each of us individually is not satisfied with any level of joy and happiness, and this is true of all sentient beings. Just as I, as an individual, have the natural right to fulfil this basic aspiration, so do all other sentient beings. It is crucial to recognise this fundamental equality.**

What then is the difference between self and others? No matter how important and precious each person is, we are only talking about the well-being of one person. No matter how acute their suffering may be, we are still concerned here with the interest of one single person. In contrast, **when we speak about the well-being of other sentient beings, this word *other* refers to limitless, countless sentient beings.** In the case of this *other*, even if we are dealing with slight degrees of suffering, when aggregated, **we are talking about the sufferings of an infinite number of beings.** Therefore, **from the point of view of quantity, the welfare of other sentient beings becomes far more important than that of oneself.**

Even from the point of view of our own self-interest, if others are happy and satisfied, then we ourselves can also be happy. On the other hand, if others are in a perpetual state of suffering, then we too will suffer from the same fate. The interest of others is intimately linked with our own self-interest; this is very true. Furthermore, based on our own personal experience, **we can observe that the more we hold onto a strong sense of self (cherishing our own self-interest) the greater our own emotional and psychological problems.**

Of course the pursuit of our own self-interest is very important. However, we need a more realistic approach: not to take self-interest too seriously but spend more time thinking about the well-being of other sentient beings. Being more altruistic and taking into account the feelings and well-being of other sentient beings is, in fact, a much more healthy approach in pursuing our own interests. If we do that, we will see a marked change, a feeling of relaxation. We will no longer be easily provoked by petty circumstances, thinking that everything is at stake, and acting as if our whole image, identity, and existence is being threatened. On the other hand, if we constantly think of our own self-interest (totally oblivious to the well-being of other sentient beings) then even the tiniest circumstances can provoke deep feelings of hurt and disturbance. The truth of this is something we can judge from our own experience.

In the long run, **generating a good heart will benefit both ourselves and others.** In contrast, **allowing our minds to remain enslaved by self-centredness will only perpetuate our feelings of dissatisfaction, frustration, and unhappiness, both in temporary terms and in the long term as well. We will waste this wonderful opportunity we have now; of being born as a human, of being equipped with this wonderful human faculty of intelligence, which can be utilised for higher purposes. So it is important to be able to weigh these long-term and short-term consequences. What better way to make our human existence meaningful than by meditating on bodhichitta; the altruistic aspiration to attain enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings.**

Generating the Awakening Mind

On my part, **I cannot claim to have realised the awakening mind or bodhichitta. However, I have a deep admiration for bodhichitta. I feel that the admiration I have for bodhichitta is my wealth and a source of my courage. This is also the basis of my happiness; it is what enables me to make others happy, and it is the factor that makes me feel satisfied and content. I am thoroughly dedicated and committed to this altruistic ideal.** Whether sick or well, growing old, or even at the point of death, I shall remain committed to this ideal. I am convinced that I will always maintain my deep admiration for this ideal of generating the altruistic mind of bodhichitta. On your part too, my friends, **I would like to appeal to you to try to become as familiar as possible with bodhichitta. Strive, if you can, to generate such an altruistic and compassionate state of mind.**

Actual realization of bodhichitta requires years of meditative practice. In some cases, it may take eons to have this realization. It is not adequate simply to have an intellectual understanding of what bodhichitta is. Nor is it sufficient to have an intuitive feeling like, "May all sentient beings attain the fully enlightened state." These are not a realization of bodhichitta. Even so, I think it is worth it, for what more profound practice of Dharma is there? As Shantideva states:

> 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!

When we think of bodhichitta superficially, it may seem quite simple; it may not even appear all that compelling. In contrast, the tantric meditations on mandalas and deities might seem mysterious, and we may find them more appealing. However, when we actually engage in the practice, bodhichitta is inexhaustible. There is also no danger of becoming disillusioned or disheartened as a result of practicing bodhichitta, whereas in meditations on deity yoga, reciting mantras, and so on, there is a danger of becoming disillusioned, because we often enter into such practices with too high an expectation. After many years, we might think, "Although I have done deity yoga meditation and recited all these mantras, there is no noticeable change; I haven't had any mystical experiences." This type of disillusionment is not the case with the practice of bodhichitta.

Since the realization of bodhichitta requires a long period of practice, once you have slight experience, it is vital that you affirm your cultivation of bodhichitta through aspirational prayers. This can be done in the presence of a guru or in the presence of a representation of a buddha. Such a practice can further enhance your capacity for generating bodhichitta. By taking the bodhisattva vow in a special ceremony, you affirm your generation of bodhichitta in the presence of a teacher.

The first part of this type of ceremony is the generation of aspirational bodhichitta. What is involved here is that by generating this altruistic aspiration to attain buddhahood for the benefit of all beings, you pledge that you will not give it up or let it degenerate, in both this lifetime, but also in future lives. As a commitment, there are certain precepts to be observed. The second part is the ceremony for taking the bodhisattva vows. This should be done by someone who has already prepared themselves by going through the first stage.

Having developed enthusiasm for engaging in the bodhisattva's deeds, you then take the bodhisattva vows. Once you have taken bodhisattva vows, whether you like it or not, whether it is pleasurable or not, what is required as a commitment is to keep the vows as precious as your own life. To make that pledge, you must have determination as solid as a mountain; you are making a pledge that from now on you will follow the precepts of the bodhisattva and lead your life according to the bodhisattva training.

Of course some readers are not practicing Buddhists, and even among practicing Buddhists, some may not feel committed to taking the bodhisattva vows, especially the second part. If you feel hesitant about being able to observe the bodhisattva vows, then it is best not to make the pledge; you can still generate an altruistic mind and wish that all sentient beings may be happy and pray that you may be able to attain full enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings. This should be sufficient; you will gain the merit of generating bodhichitta, but you do not have to follow the precepts. Also, there is less danger of breaking the vows. So if you do not take any vows, you simply develop aspirational bodhichitta. You can be your own judge.

> With the wish to free all beings
> I shall always go for refuge
> To the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha
> Until I reach full enlightenment.
>
> Enthused by wisdom and compassion,
> Today in the Buddha's presence
> I generate the mind for full awakening
> For the benefit of all sentient beings.
>
> As long as space remains,
> As long as sentient beings remain,
> Until then, may I too remain
> and dispel the miseries of the world.