Chapter 2 Offering and Purification

According to the tradition of the Buddhadharma, training the mind is a gradual process. We purify ourselves by getting rid of our biggest defects first. And we develop good qualities by expanding on the few we already have. Āryadeva,[18] Nāgārjuna's principal disciple, said:

> First be rid of evil,
> Then be rid of self,
> Finally be rid of thoughts.
> Wise is the one who knows this.

This is the path that a wise person has to take. **"First be rid of evil."** To attain ultimate omniscience and be able to benefit all beings, it is necessary to have a human life, which is the supreme support for progressing toward enlightenment. To obtain a human life, which is a fortunate rebirth, it is necessary to avoid the non-virtuous actions that will lead to birth in the lower realms of saṃsāra.

Despite the occasional sombreness of the picture, Shāntideva's teaching is profoundly optimistic. **If suffering is the fruit of thought and action, it can be avoided. The realization that we are in a position to change ourselves and so shape our destiny, leads logically to confession**, the subject of Shāntideva's 2nd chapter. Here it should be understood that although regret is naturally entailed, this does not involve an orgy of guilty breast-beating or exaggerated feelings of inadequacy. **In Buddhism, confession is to be understood principally in the sense of open acknowledgment (primarily to oneself) of past behaviour. When former actions and one's own nature are confronted, when old behaviour patterns and tendencies are raised into consciousness, then and only then can they be changed; then and only then is a new direction possible. It is interesting to note that, having called upon the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas and declared his guilt, Shāntideva does not ask them for forgiveness. They are invoked as protectors and supreme witnesses of his self-disclosure and resolve. It is in their presence that an old course comes to an end and a new one begins.**

"Then be rid of self." Having forsaken negative actions, we have to abandon their causes, which are negative emotions. The only antidote to these is the wisdom that knows the non-reality of things. According to Nāgārjuna and his spiritual descendants, the root of negative emotions is the ignorance of believing that phenomena are real. This has many aspects, gross and subtle. In order to dissolve the concept of substantiality, however, we must first abandon belief in the existence of the individual as an entity, or self. But it is not enough simply to have a vague grasp of this question. It is necessary to refine our understanding and insight, and to gain that subtle wisdom whereby the notion of self is eradicated.

"Finally be rid of thoughts." To attain enlightenment, we have to remove both negative emotions and their causes and also the habits that obscure knowledge. Once we annihilate these obscurations, we attain omniscience. The path leading to this is the wisdom that understands that things have no reality.

Through meditation we can establish firmly the view of emptiness. This extraordinary view, impregnated with compassion and combined with the accumulation of merit, completely destroys the veils that obscure knowledge. The purpose of such meditation is to act as the antidote to our own negative emotions and their traces and, indirectly, to the obscurations of all other beings. Once this goal has been achieved, all concepts, including that of emptiness, must be abandoned.

"Wise is the one who knows this." This refers to those who know the different stages of the path and its essential points and who practice them in the correct order so that they attain full realisation. It is very important, therefore, to know how to practice properly and not to be satisfied with a vague or partial knowledge of the path. The *Bodhicharyāvatāra* gives a complete explanation of the whole path. Please study it with the intention of bringing the infinity of sentient beings, who have been our parents, to enlightenment.[19]

If we wish to help beings, we have to be able to liberate them from suffering and dispel their ignorance. This means that we ourselves must have true realisation, and this can only be achieved through endeavour and the development of clear insight and mental calm. This is how to develop relative bodhichitta and begin helping beings.

Before taking the vow of bodhichitta, we should bear in mind what it is we are aiming at and how we should proceed. We then recite the Seven Branch Prayer,[20] with our thoughts directed to the ideal of bodhichitta. The first of the Seven Branches is homage:

---

[18] Āryadeva (second century) continued the work of Nāgārjuna and further explained the teachings of the Middle Way.

[19] See chap. 8, "Traditionally there are two methods … ," for a traditional method of developing compassion and concern for other beings by regarding them as one's parents.

[20] The Seven Branch Prayer is a practice for purifying oneself and accumulating merit through homage, making offerings, confession, rejoicing in others' virtue, requesting teachings, entreating the Buddhas and other teachers to remain in this world, and dedicating one's merit to the enlightenment of all beings.

1
To the Buddhas, those thus gone,
And to the sacred Dharma, spotless and supremely rare,
And to the Buddha's offspring, oceans of good qualities,
That I might gain this precious attitude, I make a perfect offering.

This is followed by the branch of offering:

2.
I offer every fruit and flower,
Every kind of healing draft,
And all the precious gems the world contains,
With all pure waters of refreshment;
3.
Every mountain wrought of precious jewels,
All sweet and lonely forest groves,
The trees of paradise adorned with blossom,
Trees with branches bowed with perfect fruit;
4.
The perfumed fragrance of divine and other realms,
All incense, wishing trees, and trees of gems,
All crops that grow without the tiller's care,
And every sumptuous object worthy to be offered;
5.
Lakes and meres adorned with lotuses,
Delightful with the sweet-voiced cries of waterbirds,
And everything unclaimed and free
Extending to the margins of the boundless sky.
6.
I hold them all before my mind, and to the mighty Sage, the greatest of our kind,
And to his heirs, I make a perfect offering.
Sublime recipients, compassionate lords,
O think of me with love; accept these gifts of mine!

Here we make an offering of everything we have along with everything else in the universe, things that are owned by someone and those that do not belong to anyone. Then we offer our own bodies. Whether or not we have a perfect body, we should offer it sincerely. This is a method of turning away from negative actions on the physical level. Next we make the offering of scented baths, celestial garments, exquisite perfumes, incense, songs of praise, and so on.

With all these offerings it is not quantity but quality that counts. Quality concerns both the materials and the intention with which they are offered. The materials offered should not be things that have been obtained dishonestly. Our intention should not be spoiled by the eight worldly preoccupations: gain or loss, pleasure or pain, praise or criticism, and fame or infamy.

When we talk about offerings that do not belong to anyone, such as all the beautiful landscapes in the world and all the different universes that have no owner, at first glance they may not seem to have anything to do with us. What is the use of mentally offering something we do not own? But in the Abhidharma it is said, "All world systems are the result of karma."[21] And according to the *Entrance to the Middle Way*:

The infinite variety of beings and universes
Has been created by the mind.
All universes and beings are the result of karma.

The universe that we inhabit and our shared perception of it are the results of a common karma. Likewise, the places that we will experience in future rebirths will be the outcome of the karma that we share with the other beings living there. The actions of each of us, human or nonhuman, have contributed to the world in which we live. We all have a common responsibility for our world and are connected with everything in it. This is why we can make an offering of it.

Next comes the branch of obeisance.

24.
To Buddhas of the past, the present, and all future time,
And to the Dharma and Sublime Assembly,
With bodies many as the grains of dust
Upon the earth, I will prostrate and bow.

[21] Abhidharma is the section of the Buddha's teachings that explains Buddhist metaphysics and the various levels on the path to Buddhahood.

Prostrations are an antidote to arrogance and conceit. Before teachers begin teaching, they prostrate to the throne on which they will sit. They do this as a guard against conceit. Here we must differentiate between conceit and self-confidence. Conceit is undesirable, whereas we need to have self-confidence and the inner strength that comes from it.

The branch of confession is preceded by refuge.

26.
Until the essence of enlightenment is reached,
I go for refuge to the Buddhas.
Also I take refuge in the Dharma
And in all the host of Bodhisattvas.

To make a proper confession, it is necessary to do so with **the *four powers***.[22] **The first of these is the power of the support, which is to take refuge in the Three Jewels and to generate bodhichitta. The second power entails deep and sincere regret for all the negative actions we have done until now and the negative emotions we have indulged in. This requires reflection on the harmful effects of negative actions. The third power is the resolve never again to commit these negative actions, even if it were to cost us our lives. The fourth is the power of the antidotes, such as prostrations, recitation of mantras, and specific purificatory practices.**

As well as thinking of the consequences of negative actions, we should make our confession more profound and forceful by reflecting on the inevitability of death and on the uncertainty of when it will occur. When we come to die, our future will be determined only by the positive and negative actions we have done.

33.
We cannot trust the wanton Lord of Death.
The task complete or still to do, he will not wait.
In health or sickness, therefore, none of us can trust
Our fleeting, momentary lives.

34.
And we must pass away, forsaking all.
But I, devoid of understanding,
Have, for sake of friend and foe alike,
Provoked and brought about so many wrongs.

35.
But all my foes will cease to be,
And all my friends will cease to be,
And I will also cease to be,
And likewise everything will cease to be.

38.
The thought came never to my mind
That I too am a brief and passing thing.
And so, through hatred, lust, and ignorance,
I have committed many sins.

If we think of death in this way, we will naturally regret our past negative actions and wish to confess them immediately, feeling ill at ease until we have completely purified them. It is with such a sense of urgency in mind that Shāntideva says:

47.
Thus, from this day forward I take refuge
In the Buddhas, guardians of beings,
Who labor to protect all wanderers,
Those mighty ones who scatter every fear.

The Buddha who gives us refuge has **conquered the four demons: the aggregates (skandhas), negative emotions, death, and pride.**[23] We could not, however, rely on his protection were it not for his great compassion. From the moment he generated bodhichitta until he attained enlightenment, the Buddha never ceased to work for the benefit of others, according to their individual capacities and aspirations. For this reason he is known as the Protector of Beings. So it is in this powerful, compassionate Buddha, who can dispel all fear, that from now on we take refuge. We also take refuge in his teachings and in the assembly of Bodhisattvas who have understood these teachings.

---

[22] Regret, Reliance, Remedy, Resolve. See Buddhism Glossary Advanced.

[23] The term demon is often used in Buddhism to denote any obstacle to spiritual progress. Such obstacles are manifestations of our own minds and karma. They should not be thought of as hostile, animate beings threatening us from outside.

Concerning refuge in the Buddha, Dignāga[24] opens his *Compendium of Logic* thus:

> He has become authentic and knows how to help beings:
> I prostrate to the Buddha, the Sugata, the Protector.

We mean by *authentic* one who is free from suffering and fear and who knows how to free others. He helps all beings impartially and with great compassion, protecting all in need. He did not, however, appear spontaneously and without any cause, like an eternal creator. He has not always been authentic. He has become an authentic refuge as a result of definite causes and conditions, chiefly his desire to help others. **When the Buddha himself was an ordinary being, wanting to be happy and to avoid suffering, he realised that these feelings were shared by all others, and he was moved by great compassion to free them from sorrow and bring about their happiness.**

But to help others, it is not sufficient merely to wish to do so. Indeed, altruistic thoughts can become an obsession and increase our anxiety. When such good and positive thoughts are combined with wisdom, we know how to help beings effectively and can actually do so. The Buddha, overwhelmed by compassion, saw how beings suffer, and knowing that the cause of their suffering was the uncontrolled turbulence of their minds, he knew how to help them. He knew that their minds were uncontrolled ultimately because of ignorance, the mistaken belief in the reality of things. He knew, too, how to counteract this with the wisdom of emptiness. For a Buddha is one who knows how to help beings by showing them what they should do and what they should avoid and, above all, who reveals to them the wisdom of realising emptiness.

For this purpose Shākyamuni Buddha taught the graded path of the Four Noble Truths with their sixteen subdivisions.[25] First he gathered around him those who had not yet started on the path and matured their minds by revealing to them impermanence and suffering, turning their thoughts away from samsara. Then he liberated those thus matured by teaching them the non-reality of things, causing the understanding of emptiness to arise in their minds and leading them to ultimate liberation.

We call the Buddha our Teacher because he showed us what to avoid and what to take up. He himself developed the supreme wisdom that understands emptiness to the point where all dualistic perceptions disappeared, and his realisation was complete. On the basis of his own experience, he was able to dispel all the sufferings of others and give them refuge. However, just as in ordinary life we would not trust someone until we had checked that what he or she said was reliable and true, in the same way, **we should examine the Buddha's teachings carefully before accepting them**. **Broadly speaking, these teachings fall into two categories: those that show how to attain temporary happiness in higher rebirths and those that teach the path to the ultimate freedom of Buddhahood.**

The *Sūtra of the Visit to Lankara* speaks of five vehicles: that of humans and celestial beings; that of Brahma; that of the Shrāvakas; that of the Pratyekabuddhas; and that of the Bodhisattvas. The first two of these are common to both Buddhist and non-Buddhist traditions. The last three are specific to the Buddhist path in their teachings on ultimate freedom and emptiness, which is what we are usually referring to when we speak of the Buddha's Doctrine.

When we examine a teaching, we should analyse the principal points. If these stand up to analysis and prove correct, then any apparent contradictions in minor details are of secondary importance. As it is said in the *Treatise on Logic*:

> If the principal point is reliable,
> The rest is secondary.

And the Buddha himself said:

> **O monks, just like examining gold in order to know its quality,**
> **You should put my words to the test.**
> **A wise person does not accept them merely out of respect.**

Do not take the Buddha's words literally simply out of reverence. Examine them and respect them only when you have seen a good reason for doing so. Of course, faith is very important for spiritual practice, but blind devotion to the Buddha is not enough. We must have valid reasons for respecting his teachings. In the Buddhadharma, and particularly **in the Mahāyāna teachings, great importance is attached to logical investigation.**

The treatises on Buddhist logic talk about the fruit and its two aspects: the manifest aspect and the veiled aspect. For us ordinary beings, the fruit of Buddhahood remains obscure. If we wish to realise it

---

[24] Dignāga was a fifthto sixth-century Indian master.

[25] The sixteen subdivisions of the Four Noble Truths are (1) the truth of suffering: suffering, impermanence, emptiness, and lack of true reality; (2) the truth of the origin of suffering: origin of suffering, production, causal basis, and conditions; (3) the truth of cessation: cessation, pacification, excellence, and renunciation; (4) the truth of the path: path, knowledge, accomplishment, and liberation.

without going astray, we have to take the path that unites means and wisdom, for it is based on valid principles and reflects the true nature of things.

To practice correctly, whichever path we follow, we should never go contrary to common sense. Within Buddhism there are many different teachings for beings of different dispositions and degrees of receptivity and intelligence. This is why there exist the different vehicles of the Shrāvakas, the Pratyekabuddhas, and the Bodhisattvas. For the same reason, the four philosophical schools (the Vaibhāshika, Sautrāntika, Chittamātrin, and Mādhyamika) and their numerous branches emerged to respond to different intellectual capacities.