Protecting and Maintaining Bodhichitta

Chapter 4 Carelessness

The thought of bodhichitta has now been generated in our minds, Next we come to three chapters devoted to protecting it from deterioration.

This mind of ours has the potential for accomplishing all the qualities of Buddhahood. But these qualities are temporarily obscured by our mistaken belief in the existence of an "I" and by self-centredness and negative emotions. These are the powerful enemies of the positive attitude that we have generated. They live within our minds; they are not outside.

Were they substantial, external enemies, we might, even if they were armed with missiles, have a little time in which to run away from them. But **there is no escape and nowhere to hide from these internal enemies. As circumstances arise, all sorts of negative emotions, such as desire or anger, can suddenly spring up. There are numerous antidotes for these. The most important thing, though, is to apply carefulness, attentiveness, and mindfulness. We need to be always on our guard, so that if a negative emotion or thought arises, or is about to arise, we are able to use these tools and to employ the antidote immediately, at the very moment that the mind is disturbed. When we practice in this way, with carefulness, negative emotions become less and less powerful.**

Carefulness is the subject of this fourth chapter.

4.1.
The children of the Conqueror who thus
Have firmly grasped this bodhichitta,
Should never turn aside from it,
Strive never to transgress its disciplines.

That the original resolve of bodhichitta needs consolidation becomes evident from the very first stanzas of chapter 4, where Shāntideva takes stock of what he has just done and begins to count the cost. The **undertaking to which he has committed himself in a moment of optimistic zeal is devastating. Hesitation is understandable. However, in view of the alternatives, and in order to stiffen his resolve, Shāntideva embarks on a graphic description of the dreadful consequences of retraction.** As always, the aim is pedagogical. Shāntideva is no tub-thumping preacher content merely to terrorise his listeners. **The situation as he describes it is certainly grim, but he shows the way out and in so doing plots out a scheme of mental training** that, for its spiritual profundity and psychological acuity, has rarely been equaled and surely never surpassed anywhere or at any time in the history of the world's religions.

The first message is that, however immense the goal may seem, it is possible; provided that we want it and make the necessary effort. We can *learn* to be free and to become Buddhas. Moreover, Shāntideva points out that having attained a human existence, we are at a crossroads; we have reached a critical point. According to Buddhist teachings, human life, at once so precious and so fragile, is the existential opportunity par excellence. Of all forms of existence, it is the only one in which development along a spiritual trajectory is truly possible. And yet the occasion is easily, in fact habitually, squandered in trivial pursuits. Time passes, and we "measure out our lives in coffee spoons." Perceiving the nature of the opportunity, and realising how it is slipping through his fingers, Shāntideva responds with almost a note of panic:

For it's as if by chance that I have gained
This state so hard to find, wherein to help myself.
If now, while having such discernment,
I am once again consigned to hell,

I am as if benumbed by sorcery,
As if reduced to total mindlessness.
I do not know what dulls my wits.
O what is it that has me in its grip? (4.26 - 27)

The situation is certainly perilous, but what is it that constitutes the danger? It is the *kleshas*, defiled emotions: "Anger, lust, these enemies of mine" (4.28). These are the roots of sorrow, to which every suffering, be it on a personal or cosmic scale, can ultimately be traced. And yet these kleshas, however terrible they may be in their effects, are nothing more than thoughts: intangible, fleeting mental states. To become aware of this fact, and to see therefore that our destiny lies in the way we are able to order the workings of our minds, is the theme of the fourth chapter. How is it, Shāntideva asks, that mere thoughts can cause so much havoc? The answer is simply that we allow them to do so. "They dwell within my mind and at their pleasure injure me" (4.29). With these words, the battle lines are drawn. **The enemy is the *afflictions*, the thoughts of pride, anger, lust, jealousy, and the rest. The arena is the mind itself.** Shāntideva steels himself for the fray, giving himself confidence by stimulating his own sense of pride and self-worth. As a method, this is highly original and very characteristic of Shāntideva's pragmatic approach (a sort of psychological homeopathy) in which an **attitude normally considered a defilement is consciously and strenuously adopted as an antidote to defilement itself.** The theme is developed at greater length later on in the book, but for the time being, chapter 4 concludes on a ringing note of aggression. **Emotional defilements are the enemy; they must be destroyed. "This shall be my all-consuming passion. Filled with rancour I will wage my war!" (4.43). Paradoxically, the conflict need not be an arduous one. Defilements after all are merely thoughts. Through analysis and skill, they can be easily removed. Once scattered by the eye of wisdom and driven from the mind, they cease by definition to exist.** And yet Shāntideva reflects, with sentiments that must go to the heart of every would-be practitioner: "But oh, my mind is feeble. I am indolent!" (4.46).

4.4.
For if I bind myself with promises
But fail to carry out my words in deed,
Then every being will have been betrayed.
What destiny must lie in store for me?

4.1. The children of the Conqueror who thus Have firmly grasped this bodhichitta, Should never turn aside from it, Strive never to transgress its disciplines. 4.2. Whatever was begun without due heed, And all that was not properly conceived, Although a promise and a pledge were given, It is right to reconsider: Shall I act or not? 4.3. Yet what the Buddhas and their heirs Have scrutinized in their great wisdom, I myself have probed and scrutinized. Why should I now procrastinate?	4.4. For if I bind myself with promises But fail to carry out my words in deed, Then every being will have been betrayed. What destiny must lie in store for me? 4.5. If in the teachings it is said That those who in their thoughts intend To give a small and paltry thing but then draw back Will take rebirth as hungry spirits, 4.6. How can I expect a happy destiny If from my heart I summon Wandering beings to the highest bliss, But then deceive and fail them?	4.7. As for those who, losing bodhichitta, Lead others nonetheless to liberation, Karmic law is inconceivable And only understood by the Omniscient. 4.8. This failure, for the Bodhisattva, Is the gravest of all downfalls. For should it ever come to pass, The good of every being is thrown down. 4.9. And anyone who, for a single instant, Halts the merit of a Bodhisattva Wanders endlessly in evil states, Because the welfare of all beings is reduced.

This bodhichitta that we have generated has not been forced upon us; we have taken the bodhichitta vow voluntarily. We have taken it with all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas as witnesses and for the sake of all beings. So to go against this vow is to show scant respect for the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. We will have lied to them and betrayed all beings as well. This is a very serious failure.

We should therefore make every effort not to spoil our bodhichitta. We must devote all our energy to this purpose. Moreover, there is no knowing when death may overtake us. At the moment, we may be in good health, but life can end suddenly. Let us make the best use of our days, being careful all the time. It is a great mistake to be lax today, saying that we will be more strict tomorrow. **We should try to discipline our minds constantly so that we can become the good people we promised to be when we took the vow. This involves watching the mind persistently.**

All of us wish to be happy and do not want suffering; we do not need to be told this. But on the one hand, we do not know what we should do or avoid in order to get what makes us happy. On the other hand, because our negative emotions are so strong, we engage in negative actions even when we can see what's wrong with them. **It is the emotions that are the real enemy to each of us being a good person.**

4.28.
Anger, lust, these enemies of mine,
Are limbless and devoid of faculties.
They have no bravery, no cleverness;
How then have they reduced me to such slavery?

4.29.
They dwell within my mind
And at their pleasure injure me.
All this I suffer meekly, unresenting—
Thus my abject patience, all displaced!

4.32.
O my enemy, afflictive passion,
Endless and beginningless companion!
No other enemy indeed
Is able to endure so long!

Those whom we ordinarily consider to be our enemies can only be so for one lifetime, at the most. But negative emotions have been harming us from time without beginning. They are truly the worst of enemies.

4.33.
All other foes that I appease and wait upon
Will show me favours, give me every aid,
But should I serve my dark defiled emotions,
They will only harm me, draw me down to grief.

There are always ways in which one can gradually make friends with an enemy. But the more we try to make friends with negative emotions, the stronger they become and the more they are able to harm us. If we think about it, as long as they continue to inhabit our minds, staying with us like close friends, we will never be happy. As long as anger, pride, and jealousy are in our minds, we will always have external enemies. If we get rid of one enemy today, tomorrow another will appear. It is endless. While we may be

able temporarily to free ourselves of enemies, **with negative emotions entrenched in our minds, we shall never find lasting happiness.**

> **4.**43
> This shall be my all-consuming passion.
> Filled with rancour I will wage my war!
> Defilement of this kind will halt defilement
> And for this reason it shall not be spurned.

Anyone who practices the Dharma has a duty to do battle with the enemy; negative emotions. If we wish to achieve ultimate happiness, we have to use the antidote to fight against this enemy. In doing so, we may encounter difficulties from time to time. But in an ordinary war, the trials and difficulties people go through are accepted and even encourage them to fight harder against the enemy. Moreover, in the ordinary world, a warrior's wounds are considered as signs of bravery, like medals. So as practicing Buddhists fighting this real enemy, whose very nature is harm, we should expect difficulties, and treat them as signs of victory.

An ordinary enemy may escape to a safe place only to marshal his forces again and attack us once more. But once we have banished the negative emotions from our minds by using the true antidote, they have nowhere to hide and cannot return to harm us. However, we do not need anything as powerful as the nuclear arms one might use to annihilate an ordinary enemy. **Negative emotions are actually impotent, based as they are on ignorance, which itself has no strength. This inner enemy is easily vanquished with the weapon of discriminating wisdom, which knows the true nature of the emotions.**

> 4.47.
> Defilements are not in the object,
> Nor within the faculties, nor somewhere in between.
> And if not elsewhere, where is their abode,
> Whence they inflict their havoc on the world?
> **They are simple mirages**, and so take heart!
> Banish all your fear and strive to know their nature.
> Why suffer needlessly the pains of hell?

When we investigate carefully, we cannot find something, some powerful enemy, called negative emotion. In reality, there is nothing there. For example, when we experience aversion or attachment, these emotions are not located in the ugly or beautiful object that causes them, nor are they located in our own minds, nor are they to be found anywhere else. When we look more closely, we realise that it is through the coming together of causes and conditions that these emotions have such power; they do not have any power of their own. They are simply a nexus of factors that we identify and label. In fact, the emotions are entirely dependent on other things. The harm they do us is due to illusion; mirage. If we really understand this, the negative emotions cannot harm us.

What we experience within is due to external conditions coming together. If we understand that all phenomena, outer and inner, are like a dream or an illusion, then we will have revealed the weak point of our negative emotions. So to conquer them, we do not need a whole arsenal of methods. We need only to recognise their nature and realise that they have no actual basis.