

Week 6 – *Bodhicitta* – the Awakening Heart

Buddhism Level 2 – Ritual & Devotion

The sevenfold puja text is extracted from the *Bodhicaryavatara* – “Guide to the *Bodhisattva*’s way of life”. As such the whole text is trying to cultivate the *Bodhicitta* – the heart of the *Bodhisattva*, or the heart of awakening.

TRANSFERENCE OF MERITS & SELF SURRENDER

Transference of Merit

May the merit gained in my acting thus go to the alleviation of the suffering of all beings

Merit is the result of skilful, “meritorious” action. A kind of potential for happiness – an easy, joyful, inspired consciousness, that’s more susceptible to happy states arising. But it’s also a kind of spiritual power:

There is no more powerful way to accumulate merit than through the cultivation of compassion. Merit is spiritual power, and is the force empowering meditative practice for insight, purification and spiritual transformation.

Buddhism with an Attitude, B. Alan Wallace

Remember the three-fold training – ethics, meditation, wisdom; so accumulating merit through ethical action is the indispensable basis of the remaining path.

Transference of merits sounds like a physical or magical process, but really it’s cultivating the intention to share with others your good fortune to have the means to cultivate merit – designed to counterbalance an easy smugness, “I’m alright Jack” attitude. We don’t identify so closely with our own field of experience.

Self surrender

My personality throughout my existences etc I give up without regard to myself

Not just merit but everything we give up, share out: personality, possessions – for the benefit of all beings – not just the ones I like.

Merit in all three ways: body / speech / mind.

Being of service

Just as the earth and other elements are serviceable in many ways...

This refers to the ancient division of our world of experience into elements:
Earth, Water, Fire, Air, Space, Consciousness.

These elements don't pick and choose who they assist; they indiscriminately "help" (and comprise) living beings in many different ways. So we cultivate the aspiration to simply be of service in whatever way seems appropriate.

BODHICITTA

These verses are cultivating the *Bodhicitta* - the "heart / mind of awakening". It's the most precious thing to an aspiring *Bodhisattva*, and the defining quality of a *Bodhisattva*: they are someone in whom the *Bodhicitta* has arisen.

When we practice *metta*, we may connect with how strongly we want other beings to be well and free from suffering; and yet realise that they are not, that there is so much suffering in the world.

The natural response to this is *karuna* – compassion. We really want to relieve that suffering. We realise that our wish "may you be free from suffering" is to wish those beings awakening – that is the only way to be free from suffering. And we can only help them achieve it by awakening ourselves.

What develops is the *Bodhicitta* – the strong heartfelt wish for Enlightenment, not just for myself, but for all beings; the wish to awaken so that others can also be helped to awaken. Within this, the delineation between myself and all beings softens: there's simply the desire for well-being through awakening.

This leads to a reorientation of priorities; instead of living life hoping to gain more pleasure than pain, we lead life in order to benefit beings – it's seen as the only thing worth doing – and that the best way to do so is to awaken.

There's different levels of fruition of *Bodhicitta*. We all have some connection with it: the basic level of *metta* we connect with in *metta bhavana* is an aspect of *Bodhicitta*; the desire for self-transcendence, for growth is an aspect. We can make this conscious, deliberately connect with it and encourage it.

Eventually the *Bodhicitta* grows to such a point that the ego-centric tendencies are toppled by it, and one's being is governed by it. Finally we fully realise it.

Equally there are different levels of *Bodhisattvas*: we can call ourselves *Bodhisattvas* inasmuch as we're trying to cultivate *Bodhicitta*. But depending on the degree to which we embody the *Bodhicitta*, to that extent we're a *Bodhisattva* "proper".

Grasp tightly the quicksilver elixir, known as the Awakening Mind, which must be thoroughly worked.

From the moment that he takes on that Mind to release the limitless realm of beings, with a resolve that cannot be turned back, from that moment on, though he may doze off or be distracted many times, uninterrupted streams of merit like the bursting sky continuously pour forth.

Such a being, unprecedented, and excellent jewel, in whom there is born a concern for the welfare of others such as others have not even for themselves, how is he born?

That jewel, the Mind, which is the seed of pure happiness in the world and the remedy for the suffering of the world, how at all can its merit be measured?

Hoping to escape suffering, it is to suffering that they run. In the desire for happiness, out of delusion, they destroy their own happiness, like an enemy.

It satisfies with every happiness those starved of happiness, and cuts away oppressions from those oppressed in many ways.

I bow down to the bodies of those in whom that excellent jewel, the Mind, has arisen, and towards whom even harm will lead to happiness. To those mines of happiness, I go for refuge.

Extracts from The Bodhicaryavatara, Shantideva, ch 1, trans. Crosby & Skilton

FURTHER READING

Ritual & Devotion in Buddhism, Sangharakshita, Ch 12.

The Bodhicaryavatara, Shantideva