

3. Shantideva (685-763 ce)

Why Shantideva is well known

Shantideva is such a well known figure in Buddhism because he is author of the poetic and devotional work called the bodhicaryavatara. It is about 100 pages in translation, and is in ten chapters. The bodhicaryavatara has been popular down the centuries, especially among Tibetans. It has affected millions down the ages. It is from this text that the verses of the seven-fold puja are extracted.

The bodhicaryavatara describes the bodhisattva, the ideal Buddhist (according to Mahayana Buddhism). A bodhisattva is intensely motivated to gaining Buddhahood, and also to helping others in practical and spiritual ways. In fact for the bodhisattva these two urges – to gain enlightenment and to help others – are the same urge.

What is especially remarkable about the bodhicaryavatara is that it conveys through imagery and poetry the richness, inspiration, devotion and heroicism of the bodhisattva's emotions. It conveys the inner spirit of the ideal Buddhist, which is of course more captivating than philosophical statements about it. [By comparison, a philosophical statement could be likened to reading several sheets of music, while engaging in the bodhicaryavatara is like listening to a live symphony.] However it may take time to appreciate the flowery language of the work, and some translations are more readable than others.

Shantideva also wrote the siksa samuccaya. This is very scholarly and much less well-known.

History of Shantideva's life

Apart from producing the two books mentioned above, all we know for sure is that he was an Indian Buddhist monk who was learned and devoted to Manjusri (the bodhisattva of wisdom). It is probable, but not certain, that he spent some time at the famous north Indian university of Nalanda.

[This university is important in Buddhist history. It is also mentioned in next week's notes on Hsuan Tsang. At Nalanda a variety of subjects were taught. The chief subject was Buddhism, but some Hinduism and even some secular subjects like medicine were covered. Some people went to Nalanda just to get a good education, as a sort of stepping stone to a political career. The university came to a

decisive end in the twelfth century when it was destroyed by Muslim invaders. There are still archaeological remains, which are apparently well worth visiting.]

Legendary material

There are many legendary accounts of Shantideva's life. Often legends say:

- he was born into royalty (like legends of Buddha) and would have been crowned as king had he not opted for the religious life
- after a period of religious practice he became an effective minister to the king
- he then went to Nalanda university where he was regarded as a slacker, but then surprised a large audience by spontaneously uttering the bodhicaryavatara, rising into the air part way through, and then disappearing.

As an example of some legendary material and edited excerpt from the "Caturasiti-siddha-pravrtti" by Abhayadatta (translated by Keith Dowman) follows.

Example of legendary text

The younger son of a royal family came to the famed monastic academy of Nalanda to be ordained in the mahasanghika order. But he had been much pampered as a child, and he found it not only difficult but unreasonable to give up his former ways. While his fellow monks studied, he lazed in bed. While his fellow monks spent hours in meditation, he strolled about the gardens of the monastery for the sake of his digestion. His other greatest pleasure was mealtime, where he savoured every grain of his five measures of rice.

His lazy ways irritated his peers beyond belief. They gossiped about him remorselessly behind his back, said equally rude things to his face, and hoped he would soon meet his comeuppance.

It was the custom at Nalanda that scriptures were read around the clock, morning, noon, and night. To maintain this tradition, each monk took his turn sitting upon the temple throne under the monks' canopy reciting his memorized portion of the sutras. Every one took his turn, without exception, except of course Shantideva. As he had managed to memorize nothing he often missed his turn. The accumulated annoyance and enmity that arose from this was surprising in so holy an institution.

Finally, Shantideva's scandalous behaviour earned him a severe warning from the abbot.

He was told that unless he mended his ways and took his turn on the rota like everyone else he would be expelled from the monastery.

"But I've broken no vow," Shantideva argued in his own defence. "I'm simply a bad scholar. Is that any reason for expelling me?"

The abbot was adamant. Tomorrow morning bright and early his turn came up. If he missed his recitation this time, he was out on his ear. Despite his warning, however, the abbot was a very kindly man, and he had a soft spot for the miscreant. That night after everyone had gone to bed to dream of the glorious comedy to come on the morrow, the abbot came to Shantideva's cell to give him some advice.

"Well, my son" said the abbot, "you're in a pretty pickle now. You've spent so much time pandering to your stomach and being a slug, you've not managed to learn so much as half as a dozen lines of any one sutra. You will certainly fail tomorrow unless you follow my counsel."

Shantideva prostrated himself at the abbot's feet and begged for his help. "Anything, sir. Just name it. I'll do it."

"The only hope for you," said the abbot, "is to spend the night reciting the mantra of Manjusri, the Bodhisattva of wisdom. You must recite the mantra until cockcrow, and hope for the best." He then gave Shantideva the secret precepts of Manjusri's sadhana (visualisation meditation), and the blessing of the mantra, and left the repentant one to his task.

Knowing his own weaknesses well, Shantideva took the precaution of tying the collar of his robe to the ceiling by a stout cord lest he nod off during the night. And all night long he recited the mantra the abbot had taught him - over and over again until he was in a stupor of fatigue.

Just before the dawn, his cell was suddenly flooded with light. Shantideva jerked awake and decided it must be sunrise, and here he was, not one whit wiser than he'd been the night before. Just then, a great voice boomed from the ceiling, "What do you think you're doing?"

Looking up, the exhausted monk saw an enormous figure floating in the air above his head. "I am invoking the aid of Lord Manjusri to help me recite a sutra this very day, and I

have learned none. But, who are you, and what do you want of me?"

"That's a foolish question," replied his unusual guest. "You've been invoking me half the night."

"Y-y-y-you are Manjusri himself!" stammered the startled monk.

"The very one. Now tell me what you want and let me get on about my business."

Shantideva would have flung himself to the floor but he was still tied to the ceiling, so he pressed his palms together in the gesture of supplication, and begged, "Please, great lord, grant me the power and realization of every quality of perfect insight."

"Done!" said Manjusri. "Recite your sutra when you are called." And he vanished as suddenly as he had come.

Word was abroad that Shantideva was about to make a fool of himself this very day, and King Devapala and his entire court came for the show. The altar was piled high with the fragrant offerings of flowers all the visitors had brought with them.

The audience tittered and whispered to each other when Shantideva arrived in the great hall. They were amused as he walked confidently down the aisle and mounted the temple throne. He called for the monks' canopy and seated himself in the lotus position. He gazed out at his audience with great calm and waited patiently for quiet. When it became clear that he at last had everyone's attention, he levitated into the air above the throne, and his body began to blaze with a great radiance that pulsed throughout the great hall. Those who had come to laugh were stricken dumb with amazement. They looked at each other in wonder.

Shantideva greeted the king and asked, "Shall I recite a traditional sutra, your majesty, or would you prefer something of my own composition?" The king began to smile. "I am told that your eating habits are highly unusual," he said, "and your sleeping and strolling habits are subjects of great wonder to your fellow monks. It seems only fitting that you would maintain your standards of originality and recite a sutra of your very own."

Whereupon Shantideva began to compose and recite the sublime and profound discourse that came to be called the "bodhicaryavatara", 'The Pathway to Enlightenment'. When he had completed the tenth and last chapter he rose into the sky to the height of seven palm trees, inspiring renewed faith in those who had assembled there that day.

The people began to strew the places his feet had touched with flowers, and the pundits humbly requested a commentary on his discourse. Shantideva obliged them, but when the monks entreated him to become their abbot, he refused.

That night, he left his robes, his begging bowl, and all his sacred artefacts upon the altar as an offering, and departed secretly. Travelling from land to land, he finally arrived in Dhokiri, a town of some two hundred and fifty thousand households. There, he fashioned himself a handsome sword out of a piece of wood and painted it with some gold paint. The following day he made his way to the court, prostrated himself before the king, and requested a position as swordsman with the palace guard. The king decided he was a likely looking fellow and hired him on the spot at the handsome stipend of ten tolas of gold a day.

Shantideva served the king faithfully for twelve years. By day he lived as any other soldier. By night he practiced his sadhana, constantly attentive to the ultimate nature of reality. No one was any the wiser about his true nature until one afternoon when everyone was in the armoury polishing up their weapons and repairing their gear. One of the guards took a good look at Shantideva's sword. It seemed to be made of wood! Thinking to do himself a service, the guard went off immediately to report his findings to the king and expose the impostor. Shantideva was summoned to the throne room.

"Show me your sword," demanded the king.

"I would gladly do so, sir," said Shantideva, "but it will do you great harm if I obey."

"Do as I say!" commanded the king. "Let me worry about the results."

As Shantideva reached for the pommel, he pleaded, "At least cover one eye, sir."

Laughing among themselves, the king and all who were gathered there each covered one eye with a hand. Whereupon Shantideva

unsheathed the sword of awareness. As he pointed it heavenward, a light as intense as ten suns filled the throne room, blinding each unprotected eye. Everyone there, including the king, fell upon his knees before Shantideva, entreating the yogin's forgiveness and mercy.

Shantideva went to each person in the room, beginning with the lowliest servant, and spitting on his forefinger, rubbed his healing saliva onto each injured eye, magically restoring the lost sight. The king begged him to remain as his palace priest, but Shantideva declined and departed Dhokiri that very day....."

Comment on his fellow monks thinking he was indolent

One way of interpreting this part of the legend is that Shantideva's fellow monks didn't see his spiritual potential. In practice most people gauge someone's maturity from externals: whether they have a confident personality, whether they can deftly bounce around ideas, and perhaps whether they have a position in a religious hierarchy. But these external things are not a reliable guide, and in the legend of Shantideva it seems the other monks didn't look beyond externals. So perhaps the moral of the story is that we should look deeper and not to be taken in by externals.

Another interpretation may be that true inspiration (as when he gave utterance to the bodhicaryavatara) comes from a more exalted and inspired part of ourselves. At more ordinary times we may be quite out-of-touch with this. So it is as if the inspired person is a completely different person.

Comment on Shantideva rising into the air

Being in the air symbolises being free from ordinary mundane constraints. (One is freed of the restriction of gravity, and doesn't have to climb over things to get about.) So floating or flying represents a state of mind, like that of the angel or the dakini, which is free of the usual inhibitions and negative impulses.