

## The Supreme Medicine of Exchanging Self-Enclosure for Altruism

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In this chapter, it is my pleasure to introduce the essential teachings of Nalanda University, which integrated and transmitted the full legacy of all the Buddhist traditions throughout ancient India, including those of the Individual Vehicle or *Theravada*, the Universal Vehicle or *Mahayana*, and the Esoteric Vehicle or *Tantrayana*. That means distilling the oceanic intellectual and scriptural legacy contained within the entire gradual curriculum and all three great libraries of Nalanda such as Ratnagiri, a legacy shared with many other great Indian Buddhist universities of the first millennium. Perhaps the greatest gift—the jewel in the crown—of this legacy is the holistic, analytic, and highly sophisticated mind/body medicine and psychology developed in India and most fully preserved in Tibet.

Although we are rightly proud of our modern medicine, with all its high-tech science and interventions, Tibetan doctors and psychologists are concerned that our worldview is too reductive, too materialistic. Many in the West now agree that our healthcare system has some real problems. Given its limitations in the realm of prevention and end-of-life care, and its overuse of surgery and pharmaceuticals, some think our medical system is in crisis. Increasingly, committed professionals have seen the need to complement conventional training and practice with alternatives, and many have become interested in the spiritual dimension of healing. As the evidence of brain science and clinical applications of meditation grow, I believe this will happen more and more, thanks to the effort of a few pioneers including the contributors of this volume. We are all very grateful to be able to teach caring healers from within the sacred circle or *mandala* of the Medicine Buddha, *Bhaishajyaguru*. Although psychology and psychotherapy actually fall more within the broad healing science and art of the Buddha's teaching than the realm of Buddhist medicine, some of you may be doctors and nurses, and in any case the two overlap in the sophisticated neuropsychology of Tibet's Tantric Buddhism. So it is only fitting that as I set out to explain what is considered the essential nectar of Buddhist psychology, the art of exchanging self-enclosure for altruism, that I do so by first invoking and inviting you into the visionary world of healing offered by Tibetan medicine.

## Envisioning the Buddha as Archetypal Healer

Traditionally, when a person aspires to become a Tibetan doctor or healer, not only does she work very hard to cultivate the altruistic spirit of universal love and compassion, but she would also imaginatively and ritually enter into the sacred circle or visionary world of the Medicine Buddha. What that healing individual does with that initiation or consecration into the world of the Buddha's healing is to cultivate a deep sense of connection. The ritual and contemplative art she enters into is meant to cultivate a sense of connection with the healing wisdom of the Medicine Buddha, and the healing presence of the Medicine Buddha; a sense that there are those who once lived or still live on this earth who know at the deepest level what promotes health and eliminates sickness, who have the compassion to share that, and who are deeply concerned for the well-being and health of all life.

If you were to become a Tibetan doctor, psychologist, or healer, you would first learn to protect your heart and mind and to recharge your batteries, so that you can avoid the burnout that happens to many doctors, nurses, and psychologists, simply by being exposed to the immense amount of sickness and suffering in the world. The ritual consecration that placed you into the domain of the Medicine Buddha would also teach you a yoga in which you visualize the Medicine Buddha, and practice identifying yourself with him, so you can make yourself a vessel of healing wisdom and power. That doesn't mean that you must become a strictly spiritual healer. A Tibetan doctor doesn't live in a fantasy world that she can shine a light at you that makes you magically heal. Although there are some who focus on developing the psychic healing power of unconditional love and compassion, most are normal doctors that practice taking a medical history, doing pulse-diagnosis, analyzing the evidence, and prescribing lifestyle changes, meditations, acupuncture or herbal pills. Yet they themselves sense the Medicine Buddha is with them and within them. They are protected, empowered, and focused in their energy by the exceptional healing power of the Buddha, understood as the supreme healer of the human condition, the preeminent mentor of doctors, nurses, psychologists, and all who seek to heal all the suffering of life on earth.

As a patient who is trying to heal, when you take the medicine, or do the recommended lifestyle therapy, you might also invoke the presence of the Medicine Buddha, say the *mantra* of Medicine Buddha, feel connected to that. This is meant to enhance the treatment by putting your mind into a positive state. This amounts to a consciously cultivated placebo effect. Buddhist medicine harnesses that power. So part of the reason to take an initiation or learn about the Medicine Buddha, whether as a healer or as a patient, is to engage the mind's full healing power. For the doctor or healer, that serves to intensify the potency of their bedside manner. For the patient, it serves to intensify the potency of the placebo effect in their mind. In fact, the healing power of mind is harnessed at all points in the medical system.

## The Role of Mind and Heart in the Buddhist Medical Tradition

Of course, Tibetan medicine, Buddhist medicine, is not seen as in any way magical. It is seen as a science, based on an analytical understanding of the causes and

conditions of illness and health. For instance, each herbal remedy is composed of as many as twenty to thirty separate herbs, grouped into three main categories: herbs that counteract a particular diagnosed disease process; herbs that mitigate side effects caused by the active ingredients of the compound; and herbs that promote the basic health and balance of underlying tissues to intensify and accelerate the healing process. In addition, the medicines are given within a complex healing regimen that usually involves prescribing a change from unhealthy behaviors to healing alternatives, psychological prescriptions to transform negative mind-states into positive ones, and even ethical prescriptions to renounce negative motivations and meaningless lifestyles in favor of positive motivations and lifestyles of greater meaning and purpose. So the doctor's recitation of the *mantra* and visualization of the healing environment are understood as subtle interpersonal and psychological factors that add to a highly rational and sophisticated multi-modal approach to healing (Dhonden & Wallace, 2000).

The contemplative approach of Buddhist medicine does not only apply to conventional physical medicine and psychiatry but to all forms of care and teaching in all Buddhist civilizations, including those we would think of as spiritual counseling, psychological caretaking, and contemplative education. In all these forms of practice, compassion and its systematic cultivation play a fundamental role. This is evident in the fact that the capacity for empathy and compassion is considered a prerequisite for anyone embarking on a healing profession of any kind. Of course, basic intelligence, scientific knowledge, and practical expertise are all vital ingredients to effectiveness as a healer, but none of them is more fundamental than compassion. Just as Shakyamuni Buddha is praised not just for realizing enlightenment—including the relative, therapeutic omniscience we often attribute to our doctors—he is also praised for having the universal compassion that motivated him to become a healer and teacher for others. Without that compassion, all the knowledge in the world becomes a source of bondage, since without kindness it can lock us into an arrogant stance in which we are unwilling, even unable to help ourselves and others break free of self-enclosure and transform illness along with the pervasive suffering of fear and loss, aging and death.

Not only is compassion considered the basic foundation for any healing role but it is also seen as the quintessence of all healing training and practice. This is why modeling our own actions of body, speech, and mind after the Buddha—understood as *Bhishajyaguru*, the Mentor of Healers, or *Bhishajaraja*, the Lord of Healers—becomes the natural place for us to enter the path of contemplative healing in the Nalanda tradition. Just as modern psychotherapists model themselves after Freud and his heirs in their training, by developing a transference relationship with their own analyst—a living representative of the art—so Buddhist doctors, psychologists, and healers model themselves after the Medicine Buddha by means of a transference art of meditation that aligns them with living mentors who embody Buddhahood for them (Zopa, 2001).

## Exchanging Self-Enclosure for Altruism: Shantideva's Approach to Compassion

The essence of the Nalanda tradition is the extension of the Buddha's Individual Vehicle teachings of personal freedom into the mainstream of Indian civilization, based on the teachings of non-dual wisdom and universal compassion expressed in Universal Vehicle texts like the *Transcendent Wisdom Scripture* and *Medicine Buddha Scripture* (Thurman, 1996; Birnbaum, 2003). Historically, the Nalanda curriculum took shape based on the interpretations of these scriptures by a series of great masters beginning with the champions Nagarjuna (c. 150–250 CE) and Asanga (350–450 CE). Although the father of the Nalanda tradition, Nagarjuna, is best known for his explanation of the profound wisdom of emptiness, he began his career as a physician, and in his capacity as a royal minister also gave shape to the healing art and science of universal compassion. His healing teachings on compassion contain the quintessence of this tradition, crystallized in his *Jewel Rosary*, *Ratnavali* (Hopkins, 2007). Tibetan scholars often quote one famous passage from that classic which distills that quintessence:

Just as the grammarian teaches grammar,  
 Buddhas give teachings appropriate to their disciples.  
 To some, (they teach) abstaining from vice,  
 To others, accomplishing virtue.  
 To some, (they teach) reliance on dualism,  
 (And finally to others) non-reliance on dualism:  
 The profound, awe-inspiring practice of enlightenment,  
 The emptiness that is the womb of compassion.

The word translated here as “emptiness,” the Sanskrit *shunyata*, is Nagarjuna's term for the profound, ultimate nature of reality. It could equally be translated as “voidness,” “freedom,” or “openness.” What is remarkable about this formula is that he calls emptiness “the womb of compassion.” What he means by this is that realizing that all people and things lack their own intrinsic, independent, isolated nature or reality, realizing that they are entirely made of infinite interdependence or relativity, naturally gives rise to a sense of interconnection and compassion. The reality of emptiness itself is a kind of openness, like a sensitive and nurturing membrane that ties together all beings' sensitivities.

For a person who realizes that reality, another's suffering is as intolerable as her own. This way of seeing—called the spirit of enlightenment or *bodhicitta*—naturally leads to the development of a kind of enlightened altruism that became the focus of the Nalanda tradition. For six centuries after Nagarjuna, Nalanda masters continued to refine his wisdom and methods to cultivate that altruistic spirit and way of being. How to live in and with this radical openness and compassion—as an enlightened altruist or *bodhisattva*—became the special focus of the lineage of Asanga (c. 350–450 CE), who taught the cultivation of compassion by extending the emotional recognition, gratitude, and responsibility we feel for

kin outwards towards all beings in seven steps. The two lineages of wisdom and compassion, championed by Nagarjuna and Asanga, came together in the philosophies of Chandrakirti (c. 575–675 CE) and Shantideva (c. 675–775 CE). It was their legacy that was transmitted into Tibet by the Nalanda abbot Atisha (982–1054) (Thurman, 1991). So we can appreciate the essential Nalanda teachings on wise compassion by looking at the work of Shantideva.

### **The Story of Shantideva and his Guide to the Altruist's Way of Life**

The story passed down to Tibetan scholars about Shantideva revolves around one of the great masterpieces of Indian literature and world spirituality, called the *Guide to the Altruist's Way of Life, Bodhisattvacharyavatara* (Shantideva, 1997). The story begins in a humorous way. A humble monk at Nalanda University, Shantideva was such a recluse that he had developed a reputation as the laziest and worst student of his day. This reputation earned him the name Bhusuku, which means “he who eats, sleeps, and defecates.” Given his reclusive ways, his peers assumed that that was the sum of what he did. Nalanda for centuries had been India's preeminent university. People would come from all over the subcontinent, and beyond, from the farthest reaches of Asia. They would study for a number of years, and when they had finished, they would graduate and return to their home region to become a teacher, ruler, doctor, or government official.

Shantideva had been living in solitude at Nalanda for many years, so his professors insisted that it was time for him to defend his doctoral thesis. Traditionally, a thesis defense at Nalanda was a large public lecture given to the whole university community, which in his day numbered as many as 10,000 students and faculty. As the word circulated that the date for his defense had been set, the assumption was that Bhusuku would simply embarrass himself, and finally be dismissed from the community. The humble monk agreed. At the appointed date and time, he appeared on the lecture platform. Then he asked his audience, “Would you like to hear something similar to what you have heard before, or something unprecedented?” Some of the senior monks replied with a challenge, “From you, Bhusuku, we want something unheard of.” “Very well, then,” he agreed, “I will share with you my unprecedented work, but if anyone is curious, my references are compiled in a *Compendium of Teachings, Shikshasammucchaya*, which I have in my cell, hidden under the bed.”

As he began his address, legend has it that he levitated slightly over the platform, about three feet in the air, because some of the audience in the back couldn't see him. Then he began to recite his *Guide* from memory. The entire audience gradually became fully absorbed in the poetic verses of his masterpiece, some who were scribes were actually transcribing his words as he uttered them. When he reached the ninth chapter, he arrived at the verse which begins the ultimate analysis of self in four keys: “Without contacting the phenomenal (self as) designated by delusion, you cannot realize its nonexistence.” At that point, it is said, he suddenly began levitating higher into the air and floating away. But before he left he



**FIGURE 7.1** *Shantideva*, Poet of Unconditional Compassion (Robert Beer, used with permission)

announced that he had chosen to call himself “Shanti-deva,” which in Sanskrit means “God of peace.” His intention was that he wanted everyone who heard his name to feel at peace.

The chapters of Shantideva’s *Guide* are arranged according to the six transcendent virtues. These refer to refined and extended visions of ordinary virtues, which arise when the practice of good qualities is inspired by enlightened altruism, guided by the self-transcendent wisdom of emptiness, and motivated by universal compassion. So the first two chapters introduce the nature and benefits of the spirit of enlightened altruism. The following six explain the practice of the transcendent virtues—generosity, justice, tolerance, creativity, meditation, and wisdom—based on conceiving and realizing that spirit. And the tenth chapter explains the dedication of this work to the benefit of all living beings. Although there is no one chapter devoted exclusively to compassion, the understanding is that all these virtues involve the integrated practice of wisdom and compassion in different forms. Shantideva shares his profound method of transforming the mind by this non-dual practice in the latter part of the eighth chapter devoted to transcendent meditation. In the Nalanda tradition, there is also a system of ten transcendent virtues related to the ten stages of an enlightened altruist’s development, in which the seventh virtue is the practice of compassion in action, known as empathic art or *upaya*.

### **The Chapter on Meditation and the Practice of Exchanging Self and Other**

Within chapter eight, starting verse 90, Shantideva introduces the art of compassion after explaining how meditation depends on solitude: “Thus having considered the excellence of solitude, by the many themes appreciating its value” (Thurman, 1996). The idea here is to prepare oneself for contemplative solitude by renouncing bodily pleasures and attachments, then to practice concentration, and finally to transform the mind.

He begins explaining meditation on compassion by introducing what he calls the equality of self and other: “First of all, let me strive to contemplate the equality of self and other. Since we are all equal in seeking pleasures and avoiding pains, I should guard all others as I do myself.” What kind of person, with what kind of experience, does it take to realize such a radical equality? A person who sees the ultimate equality of all living beings in Buddhism is called a noble individual, following the fundamental framework of Buddhist teachings: Shakyamuni’s Four Noble Truths. Although we are most familiar with that framework from the Theravada tradition, it is also fundamental to Mahayana and even Vajrayana traditions. The word translated as “noble” here is the Sanskrit term *arya*. Although historically it had referred to the social standing of the Indian nobility as opposed to the common people, the Buddha transformed it into a spiritual term. In Buddhism, the word noble distinguishes a person who has seen and feels that there is no real separation between living beings. This way of being is contrasted with that of an alienated individual who sees and feels that he has a self that is truly

separate or different from others. While the noble truths apply to personal happiness and freedom in the Theravada tradition, in the Mahayana we recognize that the laws governing transforming our own suffering into happiness apply equally to all other beings. And in the Vajrayana we see that they apply to the transformation of unconscious, compulsive modes of embodied life into fully integrated, blissful ways.

Shantideva begins his discussion of compassion with this principle of radical equality since (as Nagarjuna taught) universal and natural compassion comes out of a direct, nonconceptual realization of emptiness. A person becomes a noble person when she has had the direct experience that all people and things are without a substantial, separate self, because she no longer sees or feels any real separation or difference from others. The mind of such a noble person is a “womb of compassion,” because she experiences all beings universally and naturally as one field of sensitive life, all deserving the same love and compassion as herself and her loved ones.

How does nonconceptual experience of emptiness lead to compassion rather than to a trance-like absence of feeling? Direct realization of emptiness includes not just the space-like equipoise concentration, where everything seems to disappear, including oneself. It also and equally includes the return of appearances in the dream-like aftermath concentration. In other words, the realization of emptiness is more nondual than we think. It's not just about a seeming disappearance but also about a distinctive reappearance. Both aspects of this experience—the nonconceptual and the conceptual—are considered equally “noble” intuitive wisdoms. This non-duality is clear from the teaching that authentically experiencing emptiness also includes experiencing “the emptiness of emptiness.” When, after emerging from the dissolution or disappearance of space-like wisdom, you experience the emptiness of what you first thought was emptiness, people and things reemerge out of emptiness, all things come out of the space or womb where it seemed there wasn't anything. An equal part of the nonconceptual realization of emptiness properly understood is when emptiness *itself* disappears, and the world is back, only less clearly solid or separated.

So what Nagarjuna and Shantideva are saying is that when you achieve that realization, one of the natural effects is an expansion and extension of compassion. Once you get out of yourself, and then come back to yourself, having lost yourself in one sense, then the way you perceive yourself is completely different because you perceive yourself as an other, in a natural equality with all beings. Therefore you begin to be a person who automatically and naturally considers the feelings of others as well as your own. As the verse says, we all come to seem and feel equal because we are all in fact equal in wanting and deserving no end of pleasure, and in our wish and right to avoid pain.

So the noble person, according to the Buddhist psychology and phenomenology of human awareness, is the person who perceives another as equal to themselves automatically. They know what the other is feeling because they feel it. When you see a certain expression on someone's face, or even when you hear them say “ouch,” even an ordinarily sensitive, empathic human being will automatically think



“ouch” as well. What we may not know is that there are higher degrees of that sensitivity, where you automatically feel the pain empathetically through seeing the expression or being in the presence of that person, rather than having to think, “Oh, that person said ‘Ouch,’ and grimaced so they must be in pain.” That intuitive capacity is what makes you “noble” in the Buddhist view.

You may be a ruler or warrior, born into the aristocracy, but still be psychologically a common, self-centered individual. But when your self-centeredness has melted down even once, when you return to yourself, you now realize, “I’m not as central to this world as I thought.” This is not a merely verbal experience. You feel different, and become more of a field of awareness, in which other people’s sensitivity begins to feel like your own. Of course there are degrees of that transformation; it’s a gradual process. Women are said to realize this transformation more easily, perhaps simply as part of their embodied evolutionary role in childbearing and childrearing.

### **Field Awareness: The Emptiness That Is the Womb of Compassion**

Once we open into that field awareness, simple self-satisfaction is not so easy. From the noble person’s point of view, even enjoying simple sensual pleasures may be felt to involve suffering when others around us are suffering. In the Buddhist tradition, there’s a saying that the pain in the world is like a grain of sand in the hand of an alienated person, but like a grain of sand in the eye of a noble person. The sensitivity is much greater for the person who is automatically and empathetically aware of what everyone around them is feeling. Shantideva makes this expanded field sensitivity the subject of another verse: “The parts of the body such as hands are many. They are one in needing to be protected. In pleasure and pain, all living beings are just like me in only wanting to be happy. So why not regard them as all parts of one body?”

This verse gives you some sense of what it might be like to be enlightened and to feel that another person is actually yourself. How complicated that must be. When you look at your own hand, you may think, “If I am the consciousness seeing the hand, then the hand must be other than me.” Of course, we would still exist if for some terrible reason our hand was amputated. Without that hand, I would still be me, so in a sense, the hand is *not* me. Yet when I look at the hand, even as something separate from me, it feels like me at the same time. Now, given that thought experiment, imagine if you were looking at another person and suddenly felt that person was you, in the same way as your hand is you. Imagine your sensitivity extending out to and encompassing their sensitivity. Of course, in one sense, they *are* different. Such an enlightened, field awareness is far more complex than normal myopic awareness. It requires a tolerance of cognitive dissonance. It means being able to combine different levels of perception simultaneously. Those of you who work as psychotherapists likely experience and develop this kind of field awareness.

In the next verse, Shantideva's own mind poses an objection, "But I don't actually feel their pain." Then he answers, "My pain may not be inflicted on the bodies of others, but still that pain of mine becomes unbearable to me only when identified as mine." For instance, consider a person who is hypnotized. You may light a match under their feet, but in a trance they may not feel it. If you apply enough heat, their skin may burn and blister, although in some cases the injury itself may be reduced by hypnosis. The point is, even though the pains of others do not affect me directly, once I identify their pains as mine, they too become hard to bear. Such is the case for parents when their children suffer, or for lovers when their beloved suffers. Shantideva is saying that after some direct realization of emptiness, you do begin to feel the pains of others. When you identify their pains as your pains, and they become equally hard to bear, that is what compassion means. When the suffering of others is unbearable to you, because you feel that suffering with them, you have compassion.

### **Spontaneous, Unconditional Compassion: Breaking the Unconscious Self-Habit**

This reflection leads to Shantideva's next simple yet powerful verse, "So I must dispel the pains of others, because they are pains, just like my own." When you have pain, say you put your hand on a stove burner, you do not think, "Should I take it off? Should I be compassionate to my hand?" You just automatically take it off, because you feel pain. Likewise, if you have this field sensitivity, others' pains are unbearable to you automatically; you just don't want them to have those pains. You feel, "All these beings have bodies like mine, when they hurt I must help." Shantideva drives this home, "When I and others both are alike in wanting happiness, what is so special about me that I strive for my happiness alone? When I and others are alike in both not wanting pain, what is so special about me that I guard myself but not others?"

Then again, Shantideva's mind objects, "I do not protect them since their pains do not hurt me." This time in answer he points out that insensitivity is only a function of our myopic, alienated sense of identity, "Then why do I guard myself from future pains, since they also do not hurt me now?" When we identify with our anticipated future pain, and act to protect ourselves against it, we only do so because we imagine that we are going to have that pain. In fact, we typically tend to do that too much; we worry about the future pains that may never come. The following verse pushes the argument further, "I will experience that [future pain]' is a mistaken notion, for the one who dies here is almost totally different from the one reborn." What Shantideva means is that, whoever you are today, you will be different tomorrow. In fact, you are different in this moment from what you were just this morning. We ourselves, like the cosmos and everything in it, are totally and continuously changing. We have this exaggerated sense of continuity, which we then reify into an absolute sense of self. That is what Buddhist psychology calls our "self-habit." It is all wrapped up in creating a fantasy of unchanging, independent, intrinsically identifiable, objective and substantial

self, in order to deny the obvious reality of our complete interdependence and constant change.

Of course, this does not mean that Shantideva or Nagarjuna believe that there is no continuity linking different parts of our lives or even different lifetimes in the multi-life process Buddhists describe as rebirth or reincarnation. The Buddha gave the famous analogy that one life continuum carrying over into the next is like one candle lighting another: the flame carries on as a continuum of heat, a causally based stirring of molecules, even though the newly lit candle contributes new wax and a new wick. It is said to be difficult to remember past lives (whether we consider them ours or our parents') because most of our memories from this life are stored in coarse level memories we now call "explicit." Our deeper, "implicit" level of memories reach further back into our development, or ancestral past. There is a natural tendency to block these older memories out, because we are unaware of our subtler, unconscious level of mind. Buddhist psychology is not merely a matter of dismantling repressions in the unconscious, although that may be healing and helpful. It actually aims at our becoming fully awakened, fully conscious of the unconscious.

Just as we anticipate future pain even though we are not immediately feeling it, identifying empathetically with others' suffering is not exactly the same as feeling it. Still, it does stir compassion; and compassion does motivate compassionate action. Let us return to Shantideva's argument that real compassion is not a calculation, but a natural sensitivity and a natural response. "Although such self-concern is not rational, it happens because of the self-habit. There is no possessor of pain, so who can take control of it?" His point here is that we don't have to obsess about all the pain and suffering in life, since there is no absolute self or other for us to defend or cling to. Obviously we don't need to worry obsessively about "my suffering" or "yours," if we actually realize that such obsessions are all tied up in a denial-based fantasy of a fixed, absolute "self" and "other." They are in fact a repressed, unconscious nightmare or trauma we keep reliving again and again. He concludes, "There being no owner of pain, all pains are without distinctions of self and other." In other words, because there is no owner of pain, then others' pain might just as well be mine. It must be dispelled not because of some issue regarding personal identity, or some narrative construction of life—past, present, and future—but simply because it is pain.

### **Unblocked Spontaneous Compassion and the Altruist's Heroic Resolve**

This understanding amounts to a sort of universal imperative to alleviate all pain, to which his mind poses another objection: "Why should the unknown pain of all be abolished?" To this he replies, "This is no argument (but a simple fact): to abolish my own I must abolish all. Otherwise I must stay in pain with all other beings." This recognition of our total interdependence with all life becomes the foundation for the extraordinary rationality of the *bodhisattva's* altruistic resolve. This universal, enlightened self-interest is the basis of the altruist's spirit, the heroic

resolve that I be the one to save all beings from suffering. But despite our natural wish to aspire to such an uplifting ideal, unless our view of reality (of our own life and the infinite lives around us) makes this a plausible and practical solution to our predicament, we are just paying lip service and actually missing the seriousness of this vow.

If we approach this compassionate spirit from the alienated perspective of an ordinary human, how could we possibly vow to save all beings? Unless we have first broken out of our shell and come to understand that who and what we really are is part of a selfless network of infinite interdependence over infinite lives, this vow makes no sense. It's ridiculous, maybe even a delusion that requires medical treatment. The point is we have to have reworked our underlying conditioned assumption of being identified myopically with just this one body, one life. We realize that what we truly are has been here evolving forever, and will carry on and on, in some way forever. The point of the vow then becomes painfully obvious: unless I do something special about it, my life and others like it will go on in this unhappy way forever. The *bodhisattva* vow offers a rational, logical way of being, when you realize your infinite entanglement or entwinement with other beings. We save for retirement, buy life insurance to protect our loved ones, but what about planning for a better psychological future for us all? If our field awareness will in some way go on beyond this one body and life, do we want to be disliking and irritating each other forever? Of course not. We want to be all loving each other. So therefore, I must help diminish and finally eliminate all pains—my own and others—because otherwise, I will remain enmeshed with all others in suffering.

### **The Buddha Solution: Emptiness, Compassion, and the Infinite Web of Causality**

Given this understanding, the best we can do for ourselves and each other is to each become a Buddha for the sake of all. The best solution to our human condition is for everyone to become blissfully happy, which is only possible when we become enlightened. The point is, there is no escape from the web of infinite relationship that our lives depend on. So it becomes only rational that we take even tiny baby steps to ameliorate all our relationships. In this view, the tiniest positive cause has an infinite effect, and the tiniest negative cause has an infinite effect. In *The Compendium of Teachings*, Shantideva quotes the *King of Concentration Scripture*: “Who understands causality,” that is, the *karmic* causality of intentional action and development, “understands emptiness.” Everything being a web of causality means that everything is empty of any non-causal element. Therefore, emptiness is relativity, and relativity is emptiness; they are fully equivalent. It is vitally important to remember that emptiness is not nothingness, but the relativity of infinite somethingness, the causal interdependence of all relative things. So one who understands emptiness becomes minutely observant of the tiniest things. This is the ultimate meaning of being mindful. Being mindful of the tiniest things, when you know relativity and emptiness, means realizing that every little thing has

infinite repercussions. This doesn't just apply to what you physically do, or what you say, it's also what you think. The most powerful *karmic* causality is what you're thinking. Hence the Tibetan saying, "If you want to know what your future is like, look at your mind in this moment."

The engine of *karmic* causality never idles, either at the mental, verbal, or physical levels. This is why Buddhist cultures have so many Nalandas, so many contemplative universities, because the society and everybody in it wants to go clean up their mind. They have become poignantly aware that even thinking is either evolutionary or devolutionary action. When your view of reality includes the fact that the tiniest little piece of selfishness and the tiniest little piece of generosity both have infinite effects, then you're very careful of what you do. And if you are careful of what you do, you quickly realize you have to take much better care of your mind, because all actions begin with acts of mind.

So Shantideva concludes, "She who attunes her mind like this, delights in eradicating others' pains, and can plunge into the fires of hell like a wild goose into a lotus lake." And he continues:

The vast ocean of joy, when all beings are free, why am I not satisfied with that? What can I do with a solitary freedom? Accomplishing the welfare of beings, I should not be conceited or amazed with myself, but enjoying single-mindedly the welfare of others, I need not expect any rewarding fruit. Just as I protect myself from unpleasant things, however slight, I should have a protective concern and compassionate attitude for others. Through the power of familiarization, I have come to regard as myself a few drops of others' sperm and ovum, in themselves quite insubstantial. Since I learned to do that, likewise why can I not come to regard others' well-developed bodies as myself? Having understood the flaws in self-concern, and the ocean of advantages in other concern, I must abandon self-preoccupation and cultivate concern for others.

This conclusion is one of Shantideva's key formulations of the art of exchanging self and other. Of course, it isn't necessary to wait until you're totally empathetic before you can begin this practice. All it requires is that instead of constantly thinking about, "What am I getting? What do I want? What do I have?" you focus on, "What does she want? What does he want? What do they have?" You simply start to think primarily about others, and then you'll naturally practice altruism. Shantideva goes on to explain:

One who desires as soon as possible to give refuge to self and others should practice the holy secret teaching of the transposition of self and other. If I give it away, what can I enjoy? Such selfish thinking is the demons' way. If I enjoy it, what can I give? Such altruism is the way of the gods.

Finally, he follows these powerful verses with what I call Shantideva's challenge:

All suffering in this world arises from the wish for one's own happiness. All happiness in the world arises from the wish for others' happiness. What need

is there to say more. The immature work for their sake alone, Buddhas work for the sake of others, just look at the difference between them! If I don't truly exchange my happiness for others' sufferings not only will I not attain (the bliss of) Buddhahood, I will not gain even fleeting happiness.

### **Shantideva's Heart Practice Finds its Way into Tibet**

Shantideva's art was eventually transmitted into Tibet, where it forms the basis for the practice called *lojong* or mind transformation. This particular tradition came through the great Bengali prince/the abbot of the eleventh century, Atiśa, who was invited to Tibet in 1042 (Jinpa, 2005). The story goes that Atiśa had a statue of Tara, the female Buddha, who used to speak to him. After being invited to Tibet, he asked her what to do. She said, "You should accept the invitation of the Tibetans, and go up to that cold, harsh, difficult land. It will shorten your lifespan by seventeen years, but the years you spend there will have a thousand times more impact for the Buddhist teaching than if you stay as the abbot of Nalanda." Atiśa listened, and lived for twelve years in Tibet. Those years hugely impacted all schools of Tibetan Buddhism. The tradition coming from him is called the *Kadampa*, the tradition of personal instruction, which refers to the personal transference of teachings from mentor to disciple. In this tradition, the right teacher is one who applies the teaching appropriate to the needs of the particular student, just as the Buddha gave the teachings tailored to a particular person. Within the tradition of the Kadampas, there are many famous anecdotes describing the encounters between different masters and their students.

### **Atiśa Meets His Mentor: The Nalanda Abbot in Indonesia and Tibet**

These anecdotes include the story of how Atiśa met his mentor for the practice of transforming the mind, whose name was Dharmakirti of Suvarnadvipa (the island in Indonesia he originally came from). The story is that at a certain point in his career, Atiśa was in Bodhgaya, circumambulating the great shrine around the enlightenment tree, when the statue of Tara on the wall there spoke to him. "That's nice, Atiśa," she said, "but wouldn't it be better if you practiced the teaching?" "What do you mean?" he asked the statue, "I'm circumambulating, bowing, and saying *mantras*, what else should I do?" Then Tara replied, "You may be doing all those things, but you're just going through the motions. You have no spirit of enlightenment, no compassionate mind, no *bodhisattva* vow, and no will to benefit all life." Confused, he questioned her again, "What do you mean? I took the *bodhisattva* vow." Then she replied, "No, you could not possibly have taken that vow, because there is no spirit of enlightenment left in India, the lineage has been broken." Naturally he inquired, "So is it unbroken anywhere else in the world?" And she answered, "Yes, it remains unbroken in Indonesia." So he traveled all the way to Indonesia to meet this Dharmakirti. After spending years there with his mentor, he came back to India and started spreading the authentic transmission of

the spirit of altruism, inspired by the wisdom archetype Manjushri. That is the exchange of self and other lineage passed down to Dharmakirti from a disciple of Shantideva, Jayananda.

This practice is universally accepted by all schools of Tibetan Buddhism, and is considered the heart practice of the Nalanda tradition by the great master scholars of Tibet from Tsong Khapa down to the present Dalai Lama. Its essence is the spirit of heroic altruism inspired by universal love and compassion. There are two types of this spirit, the will to enlightenment and the active spirit of enlightenment. The will means that although you are not yet enlightened, you do have that deeper feeling that we are all connected in love to each other. Therefore you're inspired to make the altruist's vow: "My life purpose is to make all beings happy. To remove all the suffering of all beings, I will take it upon myself if necessary, and eventually get rid of it." This is considered like the second birth of all beings, to create this spirit. The irony is, even if you take this vow, you don't want to become a person overly sensitized by too many mirror neurons. Our discouragement in the face of suffering, our burnout, exists only because we worry too much about controlling and fixing things. With the genuine spirit of enlightenment, however, whether we are succeeding right away or not, we are happy. We are happy simply because we feel we are doing our utmost and that at least our mind is headed in the right direction.

This practice has to do with understanding the transformative power of mind when we shift its orientation to a positive mode of field awareness, a field of concern uniting us together with all life. This reminds me of Rupert Sheldrake's theory of morphogenetic resonance (Sheldrake, 2009). Sheldrake is an Oxford biologist who talks about a sociobiological force by which the energy and information patterns of all our brains are isomorphically interconnected with each other. When one person's mind-brain patterns shift, it affects the whole field of beings around her. The power of transforming the mind through practices like Shantideva's comes from the realization that when we make even a small victory over negativity in our own minds it naturally improves the field of resonance linking us to all living beings. Our change of mind resonates out and helps others shift theirs, like a flock of wild geese who are flying together in formation and then very suddenly all turn together at once. If you practice mindfulness because you are trying to clean up your own life, then your practice has usefulness and a certain power. But if you practice mindfulness in the sense that you are doing it for everyone, knowing your transformation of mind will radiate out to impact everyone, then your intensity is so much more powerful. This is Mahayana practice, because it is for everyone.

### **Living for Everyone: The Higher Purpose of Infinite Competence**

When you live for everyone you simply live better. As the Dalai Lama says, if you want to be happy, or if you want to be selfish, be wise-selfish, be compassionate. Being altruistic will satisfy both others and yourself, being selfish will satisfy

neither others nor yourself. Our lives may not have an intrinsic purpose, but we can choose a purpose. In fact, our lives can become eminently purposeful. That purpose is to really find happiness and bliss ourselves, and to share them with every other being. Real bliss or happiness doesn't come from having some ice cream, or winning the lottery, or winning the Olympics. It comes from understanding that reality is naturally blissful when we attune to it, because reality is infinite connectedness, the infinite creative energy that fulfills any kind of desire. When we discover that and work to share it with every other being, that is called becoming a Buddha. Then we have an evolutionary purpose, and we have an evolutionary goal. This is not something to be reified as a fixed state, but more like an infinite competence. If you have a friend or a loved one, and they break something, you naturally want to help fix it. If you are a doctor, you would like to provide this treatment, or offer that medicine. If you are here infinitely, you are capable of infinite improvement in your ability to help. You can become the ultimate doctor, who has the bedside manner par excellence, who just comes in and helps a person feel infinitely better. So I like to say, Buddha is not omnipotent, but omni-competent. Luckily there are an infinite number of potential Buddhas, because there is no limit to the potential of life, much less to the universe. We have an infinite field of omni-competence circling around waiting for us to get the message, to wake up to real understanding and to make better choices for ourselves and others. So let's wake up and get to work.