

BOOK REVIEW

No Time to Lose: A Timely Guide to the Way of the Bodhisattva. By Pema Chödrön. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2005. 408 pages. Hardcover, \$24.05.

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PEMA CHÖDRÖN'S ABILITY to make Buddhist teachings available and relevant to a varied audience is widely known and respected. In *No Time to Lose: A Timely Guide to the Way of the Bodhisattva* she turns her attention to Śāntideva's classic *The Way of the Bodhisattva* (*Bodhicaryāvatāra*). What makes this commentary particularly significant is Chödrön's ability to combine an intelligent and nuanced investigation of the text, in translation, with the sensibility and perspective of a dedicated, mature, contemporary Western teacher. Śāntideva and Chödrön are, in a way, both speaking from the same dharma seat with the intention of reducing suffering and supporting awakening. Chödrön's voice and contemporary examples make Śāntideva's often challenging teaching accessible and provide a foundation for further investigation.

Starting with a clear statement about the relevance of Śāntideva's teaching for her own life and Buddhist practice, Chödrön lays out a compelling basis for engaging in the study of this text. Following these teachings, she says, shows that "ordinary people like us can make a difference in a world desperately in need of help." She then proceeds to carefully articulate Śāntideva's key points chapter by chapter. Chödrön chose to omit chapter 9, the chapter in which Śāntideva presents teachings on the *pāramitā* of wisdom and a complex philosophical debate on the emptiness doctrine. As I discuss below, this places certain limitations on Chödrön's commentary but does not undermine its relevance or usefulness.

No Time to Lose follows Śāntideva's text, verse by verse, interspersing a collection of verses with commentary. This breaks up their overall flow but allows for careful examination of related verses. Chapter 1 introduces *bodhicitta* ("awakened mind/heart") as the basis for the Mahāyāna path of the bodhisattva and includes Śāntideva's poetic and

expressive statements of gratitude, humility, commitment, and confidence. Chödrön's discussion of this chapter highlights the importance of these qualities for the development of practices recommended later in the text. Her commentary addresses misinterpretations that commonly occur in the lives of contemporary practitioners, for example mistaking self-contempt, a manifestation of fixed view, for humility. She relates Śāntideva's discussion of *bodhicitta* to the cultivation of happiness, joy, and peace and, ultimately, to the understanding that "selfless action liberates us from fear and sorrow" (13). In this way she establishes the perspective she maintains throughout the commentary—that careful and dedicated cultivation of the recommended practices brings relief from suffering for ourselves and others. She states: "For endless lifetimes we've been falling into this crevasse [samsara/the world of suffering]. Let's finally get smart and not fall in anymore. And should we stumble now and then, let's catch ourselves and climb back out. That's the message" (49).

In chapter 2 Śāntideva moves from the practice of offering to a forceful presentation of the need to confess ones "sins" and face the immanence of death. Chödrön acknowledges the difficulty such language can pose for many contemporary readers and successfully re-frames it in a way that is more accessible. She notes that Western practitioners tend to interpret "shortcomings not as proof of our humanity but of our unworthiness" (52). With her reminder that compassion for oneself, along with others, is essential, she undercuts such misinterpretations and sets a context for later chapters.

The bodhisattva vow is the focus of chapter 3. In it Śāntideva presents some of his most beautiful and his most challenging verses. Selfless devotion to all beings in every way possible is the fulfillment of the bodhisattva vow. He recommends, for example, that the body be given "to serve all beings/let them kill and beat and slander it/and do to it whatever they desire...whatever does not bring them injury" (63). Chödrön successfully contextualizes these verses using the example of civil rights workers who "were willing to put their bodies and feelings on the line," and enter into dangerous circumstances where they might be "beaten, insulted, and perhaps killed" so that others might have greater freedom. This, she reminds us, is "bodhisattva wisdom and courage" and it includes the wish that those who perpetrate violence also be relieved of suffering (64).

Chapters 4 through 8 present specific methods for deepening and expressing *bodhicitta* while covering chapters 4 through 6 in the original work. In Chapters 4, 5, and 6 we are introduced to the *pāramitās*. Usually translated as “perfection” or the “virtuous quality of a bodhisattva,” Chödrön describes the *pāramitās* in language that points to their relevance to a practitioner’s ordinary life, describing them as the “six basic ways to go beyond the false security of habitual patterns and relax with the fundamental groundlessness and unpredictability of our lives” (xv).

In chapter 4 Śāntideva’s teachings on attentiveness and working with emotions and their impact is presented. Of particular note is Chödrön’s discussion of the nature and consequences of making a commitment to the bodhisattva path. She notes that taking this vow is “just asking for trouble” and requires the practitioner to “face the fact that this includes working with the unreasonableness of sentient beings like you and me” (80). She echoes the challenge posed by Śāntideva, making clear the difficulties and also reminding the reader that it is both possible and liberating to follow the bodhisattva path. In taking up the topic of “negative emotions” (*kleśas*), Chödrön addresses a central teaching of Śāntideva’s and a central difficulty for many practitioners. The tenacity and habitual nature of afflictive emotional states, as well as their power and subtlety, is countered, as she puts it, by our “clear determination, intelligent awareness, and compassion.” With attentiveness and the disciplined practice of mindfulness, the “seductiveness and power” as well as the impact of negative emotions is diminished (96).

The focus of chapter 5 is the *pāramitā* of discipline, “taming the mind,” as well as the connection between the practice of mediation and the cultivation of the “three disciplines of not causing harm, gathering virtue, and benefiting others” (104). With meditation, the cultivation of awareness, devotion, and gratitude, that which harms us becomes apparent and we are able to “see what needs to be done and act accordingly” (122). In this effort, Chödrön reminds us, the “best advice for a new bodhisattva is to tame your mind without losing your sense of humor” (124).

Chapter 6 continues a discussion of the three virtues listed above, with detailed descriptions and practices meant to interrupt habitual tendencies. These include learning to be silent rather than give in to impulsive negative speech, cultivating the faith that these practices are

possible, steadfastness in the daily effort, the need to “pace ourselves and relax” (135), non-attachment to the body, honesty and kindness in speech, study, and the need to remain close to elders and teachers.

In chapters 7 and 8, Chödrön presents Śāntideva’s well-known teachings on patience and working with anger. She frames the practice of patience as courageous and carefully presents the practice of transforming aggressive emotional states. She describes, in detail, awareness practices to be done in meditation, that is, paying attention to the sensations, thoughts, and feelings associated with anger as well as attending to the “soft spot” that she describes as underlying anger and rage. She effectively clarifies the meaning of the term evil—“intentionally causing harm” (161). She sets in context Śāntideva’s instruction to understand pain and difficulty as a means by which we deepen our realization of the teachings.

In chapter 8 we are introduced to the joys of practicing patience as well as the importance of learning that the desire for gratification and praise and the “childish craving for validation” (208) is a mistaken search for lasting happiness. Chödrön challenges us to follow Śāntideva’s injunction to cultivate gratitude toward those who insult or provoke us. She tells us that, in determining “what is worthy of your gratitude, look to the final result” (214), and recommends that we cultivate the same attitude to those who cause us pain as we would toward a doctor using painful methods that will ultimately cure us.

In chapter 9 Chödrön takes up Śāntideva’s discussion of enthusiasm, what she terms “heroic perseverance,” and the factors that support the flourishing of *bodhicitta*. Her commentary, again, includes an appreciation for pitfalls common to contemporary practitioners, such as a habit of self-denigration, but she does not shy away from Śāntideva’s urgency in describing the need to directly confront those factors, such as laziness, that obstruct the development of enthusiasm. Her description of the need to bring balance and wisdom to the effort undercuts any tendency to use Śāntideva’s teaching as fuel for self-contempt or understanding practice as an “endurance test” (240). She clearly states that the practice “introduces us to unshakable confidence: a lionlike pride that refuses to buy into any negative or limiting story lines” (259).

Chapters 10 and 11 discuss the verses on the practice of meditation, beginning with a discussion of the circumstances that support or distract from meditation practice. In chapter 10, Chödrön inter-

prets Śāntideva's teachings in such a way that they become relevant for those not living lives in solitary retreat. For example, she discusses Śāntideva's statement that we should leave "worldly life" in terms of the need to "find time to be free of outer distractions" and "take time to meditate" (271). She encourages everyone to find time for the practice of meditation and solitude. "The main point is to make solitude a part of your life" (277). Chödrön interprets Śāntideva's strong language on sexual desire and craving as being not about "sexual passion itself, but how obsessed we become and the crazy things we do to satisfy our desires" (286). In both these cases, there is a clear effort on Chödrön's part to make the teachings of an eighth-century celibate monk relevant to twenty-first-century householders, without diluting the original teachings.

Chapter 11 focuses on specific practices aimed at dissolving the illusory designation of self and other and the cultivation of compassion and open-heartedness. Undermining the "relentless sense" of self and other, me and mine, through practices such as exchanging self and other, is the antidote to self-cherishing, a "way out of the pain of self-absorption" (314) and the expression of the vow to benefit others. Chödrön notes that "[l]oving ourselves provides the foundation for cherishing others" and in this way undercuts any tendency toward self-denigration. At the same time, she states clearly that it is important that "we don't sweeten the message too much. Indulging in self-absorption is dangerous to our health" (334).

In the final chapter Chödrön advises us to read Śāntideva's verses of dedication in order to "use his expert help to voice our own deepest wishes" (341). Through dedicating the merit of an activity to the benefit of all beings, without exception, our attitude is shifted, we are "softened" and reminded of the interconnected nature of our lives. In concluding this chapter, Chödrön recommends these teachings as a support for becoming "peacemakers: effective, responsible, and compassionate citizens of the world" (360). She asks us to consider whether we believe these teachings to be valid and, if so, whether we can commit to them. She challenges us, saying, "In these times, do we really have a choice? Do we have the option of living in unconscious self-absorption? When the stakes are so high, do we have the luxury of dragging our feet?" She adds her own wish that these teachings "help each of us to make a difference."

No Time to Lose presents an intelligent investigation of Śāntideva's work with philosophical precision and the sensibility of a seasoned practitioner and teacher dedicated to making this important text accessible and available to a wide audience. As such, it provides a perspective useful to both scholars and practitioners. Including the voice of an educated and committed practitioner and teacher in scholarly investigations supports a deeper understanding of the content and relevance of the text. For practitioners, such a commentary supports the integration and practice of these teachings and opens up the possibility of further investigation into scholarly commentaries and the original text.

Chödrön has chosen not to include chapter 9 of the original text in this volume. Chapter 9 does include many difficult and challenging passages requiring the careful investigation of a variety of Buddhist philosophical positions. However, the fundamental focus of the chapter is the Buddha's teaching on lack of inherent existence, emptiness, dependent co-arising. Including a discussion of this chapter would provide a fuller understanding of Śāntideva's teaching and provide an essential link to understanding how it expresses the Mahāyāna view of self, other, and reality. Śāntideva's presentation of the relationship between himself and *bodhicitta* in chapter 1 also has interesting implications for the context of this work. *Bodhicitta* is the "source of happiness/that brings its very enemies to perfect bliss," and Śāntideva states that "this, and only this, will save the boundless multitudes and bring them easily to supreme joy" (6). This and other statements in chapter 1 give rise to speculation about Śāntideva's understanding of individual effort and the activity of *bodhicitta* itself.

In combination, chapters 1 and 9 bring interesting questions to light about the author of the actions described in chapters 2 through 8. I found myself pondering the relationship between emptiness, subjectivity, and action as I read this volume. Śāntideva emphasizes the need for sustained personal effort and describes this in great detail. Yet his first chapter is a humble prostration to "precious *bodhicitta*" and the ninth chapter centers on the empty nature of the self. Is boundless *bodhicitta* acting in the world? Is the deluded self struggling to free itself from the world of delusion? How does Śāntideva understand the effort of the bodhisattva? Chödrön's important contribution to our understanding of this central Mahāyāna text would be enriched by the addition of her reflection on, interpretation of, and discussion of questions

such as these. Her commentary on chapter 9 will, I hope, be presented “separately and at a different time,” along with a discussion of that chapter’s relationship to the whole of Śāntideva’s teaching.